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*The Doctrine of Knowledge in Isaac of Niniveh and the
East Syriac Theology of the 7-8th Century*

Direttore della Scuola : Maria Cristina La Rocca

Coordinatore d'indirizzo: Walter Panciera

Supervisore: Ch.mo Prof. Paolo Bettolo

Dottorando

Valentin-Cosmin Vesa

1050110

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Introduction

One of the most popular monastic authors with a nearly universal spread along time is Isaac of Niniveh, a Syriac author of the late 7th century, who belonged to the Church of the East. The great importance of this author is indicated by at least three aspects: firstly, Isaac of Niniveh is a very good example of the ecumenical role played by the Eastern Syriac monastic literature: coming from a religious community which both Chalcedonians and non-Chalcedonians have traditionally described as “Nestorian”, his writings were translated soon after his death throughout all the Christian world (all three Christological traditions). The second aspect comes out of his belonging to the so-called “third theological tradition”, the Syriac (Semitic) school (next to Byzantine and Latin), in a time of synthesis with the Byzantine tradition, rediscovered by scholars in recent times. And thirdly, Isaac’s writings provide important information about the religious monastic ambient in the Persian territory in a time of turbulence caused by the arrival of the Muslim powers, as well as by internal schisms or the proselytism of the Western Syriac community.

The topic we are going to deal with focuses on the doctrine of knowledge, according to Isaac of Niniveh, in its double dimension, worldly/philosophical and theological (the former considered to be more discursive/intellectual and the latter intuitive/ experiential) and the rapport established between these two, prolonged in the concept of vision, as the highest form of knowledge, describing the inner mystical life. “Knowledge” is a fundamental reading key for Isaac’s writings which, in a nutshell, describe a detailed gnoseological itinerary and yet not really systematically. We will give a contextual reading of his gnoseological doctrine in reference to the fonts he uses, paying attention to the language and structures he employs, with respect to the contemporary East Christian Syriac thinking. This topic is completely unprecedented and aims to fill the lacuna of studies there is around this author, despite his importance and his popularity for both the history of Eastern and Western Christian tradition.

As anticipated, the research topic becomes more interesting if one places it within the Christological development of the East Syriac theology in the Arab conquered territories of the 7-8th centuries and the Messalian controversies revealed in different accusations of the Church authorities and academic theologians directed towards isolated monastic influent authors (such as John the Solitary, Isaiah of Tahal, Henana, Sahdona, Joseph Hazzaya or John Dalyatha). One can identify different positions and, occasionally, three representative categories – the Church leaders, the academic theologians and the charismatic monastics. The question that arises might be expressed in a double way – are there essentially two opposite positions: theologians and Church authorities, on the one hand, and the charismatic monastics,

on the other hand? And from here, is there an opposition between the official theology of the Church and the monastic theology? Or, a second thesis might be expressed as an opposition between a scholastic and a practical-mystical theology, professed occasionally by representatives of the three mentioned categories. Therefore, the main aspect of concern in our study focuses on Isaac's gnoseology and, consequently, on his mystical doctrine, in reference to the general theological debates of his time, within the ecclesiastical community he belonged to.

We will now give a short overview of the author's bio-bibliography so as to highlight the prominent place he occupies in the history of monastic literature. He originated from Beth Qatraneh, the region of the modern Gulf States, still a strong Christian centre in the mid 7th century. He was consecrated bishop of Nineveh (Mosul) by the Catholicos of the Church of the East George, the dates of whose office (661-680) constitute the sole chronological anchor for his lifetime. After only five months he resigned. The remainder of his life was spent as a hermit in the vicinity of the Rabban Shabur monastery in the mountains of Western Iran. His writings were transmitted in several "parts", of which the "First Part" is the most important and known, since numerous chapters from it were translated into Greek at the famous monastery of Saint Saba, south of Jerusalem, in the late 8th or early 9th century. The fortunate survival of a fragment of a Syriac manuscript of the First Part of Isaac's writings that was written at the Monastery of Saint Saba shows that Isaac's writings were already circulating in the 8th century in their original language in this citadel of Chalcedonian Orthodoxy.

Various translations of the "First Part" were made from both Syriac and Greek into Georgian, Arabic and Ethiopic in the late 9th century. In the course of the Middle Ages the Greek translation served as source for translations into many other languages: Latin in the 13th century; Slavonic in the 14th century; several vernacular translations were made from Latin during the 14th and 15th centuries; in the 19th century the first Romanian translation was made from the Greek; the Slavonic, occasionally, in combination with the Greek, served as a basis for various Russian translations. From one of these Russian translations a Japanese translation was made (1909). The 20th century has also witnessed a revival of interest in Isaac in Western Europe and America after the publishing of the Syriac text of the "First Part" by Paul Bedjan¹, followed by several partial translations into various modern languages (English, Italian, German, Russian), thus making Isaac's discourses available for readers in many different Church traditions, far more widely than ever before. His large popularity can also be observed by the presence of fragments from his

¹ *De perfectione religiosa*, Paris-Leipzig, 1909.

writings in different anthologies like: Evergetinos, Greek Philokalia, Philokalia of Theophan the Recluse, Romanian edition by Dumitru Staniloae, the anthologies of Sabino Chialà and that of the Anglican Contemplative Sisters, both translated into Japanese, and the latter into several languages including Persian and Malayalam.

In 1983 professor Sebastian Brock rediscovered the “Second Part”² of Isaac’s writings. Subsequent to its publication, sections from it have already been translated into Italian, English, Russian, French, Romanian, Arabic, Persian, and Malayalam – a clear indication of the continuing relevance of Isaac’s teaching in many different Christian traditions today.

We mention that a “Third Part”³ has also been discovered recently, and this is available to the readers through an Italian, French, Romanian and very soon an English translation⁴. One can surely say that there are others parts to be identified, called “The fourth”⁵, “The fifth”⁶ and, possibly, “The sixth” and “The seventh”⁷. Then, there are other several manuscripts and texts circulating under his name, whose authenticity is to be verified. In this sense, there is an open space for future research.

The translation of the first part and especially of the second and third part brought a lot of interest on the part of scholars like Sebastian Brock, Paolo Bettio, Sabino Chialà, André Louf, Hilarion Alfeyev, Andrew Lichter, Jacques Toraille, Gabriel Bunge, Manel Nin, Wacław Hryniewicz, Marcel Pirard, Patrick Hagman, Nestor Kavvadas, Mary Hansbury on different inedited issues regarding the religious life of his time: monastic practices, contemplation, purification of mind, justice and love, suffering, nature and ecology. So far, there are few doctoral theses on Isaac’s theology: J. B. Chabot⁸, W. Thomson⁹, M. Hansbury¹⁰, L. Valiackal¹¹, Th. Manoj¹², A. Gasperin¹³, S. Chialà¹⁴, P. Hagman¹⁵, J. Scully¹⁶, M. Tang¹⁷, G.

² The original Syriac: chapter 1-3 in manuscript, to be published/ Prof P Bettio; *The second part. Chapters IV-XLI*, ed. Sebastian Brock, CSCO 224, 1995.

³ *Terza collezione*, ed. S Chialà, CSCO 246, 2011 (Italian translation CSCO 247).

⁴ Due to Mary Hansbury.

⁵ Grigory Kessel seems to have traces on “The Fourth Part” of Isaac’s writings. The preliminary conclusion is that this collection is a compilation of the discourses already known from the other collections; cf. his paper presented at the IIIrd Symposium “Syro-Arabicum”, USEK, Lebanon, February 2015 – *The ‘Fourth Part’ of Isaac of Nineveh: Lost and Found?* (to be published)

⁶ Cf. the manuscript of Ephraim II Rahmani, 15th century/ 2 homilies published by Sabino Chialà 2012: “Due discorsi della Quinta Parte di Isacco di Ninive?”, in *Orientalia Christiana Periodica*, 79 (2013), p. 61-112.

⁷ Cf. Abdisho of Nisibis’s biographical note. This text will be discussed in the first chapter.

⁸ *De S. Isaaci Ninivitae vita, scripta et doctrina*, Paris, 1892.

⁹ *Isaac of Nineveh. A Study in Syriac Mysticism*, Harvard University, 1924.

¹⁰ *Evidence of Jewish Influence in the Writings of Isaac of Nineveh: Translation and Commentary*, Temple University, 1987.

¹¹ *The Way to God According to Isaac of Ninive and St Bonaventure: A Comparative Study*, Pontifical Gregorian University, 1994.

¹² *Spiritual vision of Man. A Study based on the Complete Works of Isaac of Nineveh*, Oriental Pontifical Institute, 1999.

Păunoiu¹⁸ and some other in process¹⁹. In this context, the theme we propose is completely inedited.

The research will be divided into six chapters. In the first chapter we are going to offer a short bio-bibliography of Isaac of Niniveh in the context of his belonging to the East Syriac Christian tradition in the time of political and religious turbulences and, paradoxically, a time of flourishing of the theological literature, marked by the Greek-Syriac synthesis in the Arabic world. The second section will be dedicated to the Christological perspective of Isaac of Niniveh in correspondence with the official theology of the East Syriac Church that he belonged to. The analysis of the divine Economy, as the frame of Isaac's theological-anthropological perspective, will be the theme of the next chapter, divided into three moments – creation, incarnation and eschatology – with the correspondent levels of revelation and, in consequence, the cognitive stages that pertain to each of these moments. The fourth chapter will focus on the specific anthropological-ascetical terminology, structured into four sections – terms connected with the structure and succession of the ascetic life, then terms and concepts concerning the manifestations of the cognitive powers, different adjacent terms and, finally, terms and linguistic constructions describing different forms of knowledge. In the next chapter, we will deal specifically with the description of this process, its objectives, the steps one can identify in its evolution and, finally, the rapport established between its two dimensions (discursive and intuitive). In this section, of great importance will be the analysis of four patristic binoms: knowledge and faith, knowledge and ignorance (un-knowledge), knowledge and prayer and knowledge and vision. The last part of this chapter will be dedicated at large to the problem of vision, the highest form of knowledge, in the context of the dyophysite theological tradition of the East Syriac Church. Finally, the last chapter of the thesis will be dedicated to the dogmatic position on the spiritual knowledge – its possibility and cause, the object and content, the forms it takes and its final scope. At this point, the analysis of the primary sources Isaac uses in

¹³ *Le versioni greca, latina e italiana della prima parte degli scritti di Isacco di Ninive. Saggio di comparazione*, University of Padua, 2001.

¹⁴ *L'opera di Isacco di Ninive nella tradizione manoscritta siriana. Presentazione delle fonti e della tradizione manoscritta, seguita dall'edizione critica e della traduzione della Terza collezione*, University of Louvain, 2007.

¹⁵ *Understanding Asceticism. Body and Society in the Asceticism of Isaac of Niniveh*, Abo University, 2008.

¹⁶ *Isaac of Niniveh's contribution to Syriac Theology: An Eschatological Reworking of Greek Anthropology*, Marquette University, 2013.

¹⁷ *Sfântul Isaac Sirul. Ascet și mistic (St Isaac the Syrian – Ascetic and mystic)*, "Lucian Blaga" University, Sibiu, 2014.

¹⁸ *Asceza și îndumnezeirea omului în opera Sfântului Isaac Sirul (Asceticism and deification in the work of Isaac the Syrian)*, University of Bucharest, 2015.

¹⁹ Valentina Duca (Oxford University), on the limitations of the created condition; Boudas Matar (Oriental Institute, Rome), on the spiritual struggle; and Fabrizio Marcello (Catholic University of Milano), on the relation between incarnation and humility.

developing his own vision (mostly Evagrius, Theodore of Mopsuestia and John the Solitary) and the possible connection between Isaac and some contemporary monastic authors will be of great interest. The main accent here points to the distance between a faithful lecture and / or the personal reinterpretation of the main sources.

The objectives of our research could be divided into three sections:

- We will give a reading of Isaac's doctrine of knowledge following the critical-historical and philological method and, in consequence, we will focus on his mystical vision in the frame of the theological heritage of his Church tradition;
- We will recover an original anthropological-theological system generated in the Semitic tradition of the East Syriac Church by the meeting with the Byzantine theological thinking: that is the synthesis between the Syriac biblical tradition (in the lines of John the Solitary) and the Byzantine philosophical-ascetical tradition. Consequently, we will point to a second synthesis that Isaac carries out in his works between the two "opposite" Byzantine theological-philosophical schools in terms of exegetical methods (Alexandria and Antioch) with their well-known representatives Evagrius Ponticus and Theodore of Mopsuestia;
- We will enlighten some important aspects of the monastic theology and practice in the East Syriac Church of the 7-8th centuries (the connection between Isaac of Niniveh and other prominent monastic authors), a very complex and interesting period for the history of the Oriental Churches.

In regard to the method, the paper represents a contextual reading of Isaac's vision on the process of knowledge by looking into the original Syriac text, observing the philological method, in direct connection with the authors' writings Isaac was indebted to, using here the critical-comparative method. Of great help in this endeavour will be the studies of the scholars we have mentioned above, dealing with different aspects of Isaac's thinking²⁰ and the personal contact with some of the contemporary ones, in the process of interpreting Isaac's spiritual doctrine within the historical-theological frame of the 7-8th century in the new conquered Arab territories.

Concerning Isaac's writings used throughout the paper, as tangentially mentioned above, three collections are known up to now, being translated into modern languages and

²⁰ We point here to the bibliographical list: *A bibliography of Syriac Ascetic and Mystical Literature*, by Grigory Kessel and Karl Pinggéra, Peeters, Leuven-Paris-Walpole, 2011, on Isaac of Niniveh p. 103-122.

partially edited in critical editions. The first collection in the Syriac edition that was used in my paper is due to Paul Bedjan, published in Paris in 1909²¹. For the English text we will use Wensinck's translation (the only one that has been done in English so far), occasionally, with my own modifications, so as to be consistent in dealing with the gnoseological terminology. In reference to the second collection, for the first section (chapter 1-3), we will use the English translation provided by Sebastian Brock (the first two chapters)²² and the Italian translation of Paolo Bettolo (the third chapter, the four "centuries"), published by Bose Monastery²³. As there isn't any critical edition of this section so far, the Syriac text we will employ is a copy of a handwritten text, basis for Professor Bettolo's Italian translation, and a typed copy of Sabino Chialà, of the same text. It will be easier with the second edition, as professor Brock has published the Syriac critical edition as well as an English translation²⁴. The same situation applies for the third collection, which was critically edited and recently translated into Italian by Sabino Chialà²⁵. Next to the Italian translation we will use the English translation of Mary Hansbury²⁶, which is going to be published soon. The quotations will be mostly in English, except for the fragments from the "centuries" (II, chapter 3) of the second collection, as there is no English translation up to now. Occasionally, we will also use the other modern translation so that to establish a more precise meaning that some terms and concepts involved in my research bear in modern English²⁷.

Of great help in my endeavour was professor Paolo Bettolo, my tutor, who generously and openly manifested his support any time I had doubts, as well as offering me his handwritten copy of the first section of the Second collection (chapter 3), or different materials (articles, studies and books), which would have been otherwise hard to procure.

²¹ *Mar Isaacus Ninivita. De Perfectione Religiosa*, Paris, 1909. Sabino Chialà in present is working on a critical edition of the First collection using the numerous manuscripts known and, in parallel, to an Italian translation.

²² Sebastian Brock, "Two unpublished texts by St Isaac the Syrian", *Sobornost/Eastern Churches Review*, 19 (1997), p. 7-33.

²³ Isacco di Ninive, *Discorsi spirituali: capitoli sulla conoscenza, preghiere, contemplazione, sull'argomento della gehenna, altri opuscoli*, Qiqajon, Comunità di Bose, 1990.

²⁴ *The second part. Chapters IV-XLI*, ed. Sebastian Brock, CSCO 224-225, 1995.

²⁵ Isacco di Ninive, *Terza collezione*, ed. by Sabino Chialà, CSCO, 346-347, 2011.

²⁶ To be published at Gorgias Press. On this occasion I extend my gratitude to Mary Hansbury for offering me the text prior to the publication.

²⁷ For the First collection: *The Ascetical Homilies of Saint Isaac the Syrian*, translated by the Holy Transfiguration Monastery, Boston, Massachusetts, 1984; Sfântul Isaac Sirul, *Cuvinte pentru nevoiță*, Alba Iulia, Reîntregirea, 2010; Sfântul Isaac Sirul, *Filocalia X*, București, Humanitas, 2008; Isaac le Syrien, *Œuvres spirituelles*, trad. Jack Touraille, Paris, 1981; Isacco di Ninive, *Discorsi ascetici*, trad. M. Gallo, P. Bettolo, Roma, 1984; for the Second collection: Isaac le Syrien, *Œuvres complètes. 41 Discours récemment découvertes*, Spiritualité Orientale, 81, Abbaye de Bellefontaine, 2003; Sfântul Isaac Sirul, *Cuvinte către singuratici, Partea II recent descoperită*, trad. Ioan I. Ică jr. Sibiu, Deisis, 2003; for the Third collection: Sfântul Isaac Sirul, *Cuvinte către singuratici, Partea III recent regăsită*, Sibiu, Deisis, 2005; André Louf, *Isaac le syrien. Œuvres spirituelles d'après un manuscrit récemment découvertes*, Spiritualité Orientale, 88, éditions de Bellefontaine, 2009.

Special thanks are due also to Sabino Chialà and Sebastian Brock who encouraged me in my research and shared with me different bibliographical resources and information on the new projects connected with my research theme. And, finally, I would like to extend my gratitude to the Doctoral School of Historical and Historical-Religious Studies of Padua for the good experience it has abundantly offered to me during the last three years of my doctoral studies.

1. Isaac of Niniveh – an ecumenical figure of the East Syriac Church

1.1 Bio-bibliography

Data available to reconstruct the historical and spiritual itinerary of Isaac of Niniveh, one of the greatest Christian mystics, with an almost universal spreading of his works²⁸, are relatively scarce. More specifically, for more than a millennium, his writings circulated without any significant knowledge about his background. The readers (mostly monastics), who used to read his homilies, only knew about him what was written as the heading of the First Part of his work: “Of our father among the saints, Isaac the Syrian, ascetic and hermit, who was bishop of the citadel loved by Christ Nineveh. Ascetic words he wrote in his language and translated into Greek by our fathers Abba Patrikios and Abba Abramios, philosophers and hesychasts, who lived in the Laura of the Holy Father among the saints, Mar Sabba”²⁹.

Besides this information, his writings give us some extra information about the author and his work. Isaac vaguely indicates the time of his discourses – “when the devils had six thousand years”³⁰. There was a long debate on this item of information. If, in the Byzantine territories, incarnation was considered to have taken place in 5508 from creation, based on the calculation of the genealogies of the Old Testament, this meant that the year 6000 from creation pertains to 492 AD. But timing in Persia was guided by another calculation – the early Seleucid dynasty (312 BC), hence the year 1000 was 688 AD. In this frame, there have been several hypotheses: some thought that the year 6000 refers to the Byzantine calendar, so the year 492 AD³¹. Isaac’s first “modern biographer”, Joseph Assemani, using this

²⁸ Cf. Sebastian Brock, “From Qatar to Tokio, by way of Mar Saba: the Translations of Isaac of Beth Qatraye (Isaac the Syrian), in *Aram* 11-12 (1999-2000), p. 475.

²⁹ Nicephoros Theotokis, *Tou hosiou Patros hemon Isaac episkopou Ninevi tou Syrou Ta eurethenta Asketika*, Leipzig, 1770, p. 1.

³⁰ I, 53, p. 257 (*Mystic Treatises by Isaac of Niniveh translated from Bedjan’s Syriac text with the introduction and registers by A.J. Wensinck* (abbreviated I), Nieuwe reeks, Deel XXIII, 1, Wiesbaden, 1969).

³¹ Professor Dana Miller identifies several internal objections to this method. Firstly, this biography is irreconcilable with dating incarnation approximately five thousand years after creation (I, 28, p. 137). Furthermore, Isaac quotes Pseudo Dionysius in the Syriac translation of Sergius of Resh’aina († 536), made by the year 530. Later, he mentions Simon of Emessa, who died at the end of the 6th century (I, 6, p. 58). A fourth objection relates to a common passage also found in Simon Taibuteh’s writings (who died in the second half of the seventh century): it recounts the words of an old man (identified with Rabban Shabur), who suffers temptation for twenty years until receiving the divine grace (I, 53, p. 260). For the age of six thousand years, Professor Miller suggests two possible explanations: the first supports the possibility that Isaac to have been referring to the time of Pseudo Macarius (while quoting his writings), who speaks about six thousand years, describing the age of demons (Discourse 26:9, *PG* 34, 680); or Isaac might have been made a confusion between the calculation of the world’s age as taught in Persia with the Persian civil calendar. So, if he had written in 688 AD, it would have meant the civil year 1000, and, as it was believed that the incarnation occurred about five thousand years after creation, demons would have had six thousand years. For details see: Dana Miller, “Translator’s Introduction: A Historical Account of the Life and Writings of the Saint Isaac the Syrian”, in Dana

calculation, alleging to a possible internal references to Jacob of Sarug († 521), places him by the end of the sixth century³². Nicephorus Theotokis, in his preface to the translation of Isaac's First collection (*Ascetic discourses*) in Greek, using the biography of Assemani, in conjunction with his Isaac's letter to Abba Simeon, which he identifies with Simeon of the Great Mountain († 592), places him around 534 AD³³. In this way, Theotokis rejected two western biographies of Isaac, known by the Latin selection of 25 of the 53 chapters of "Ascetic discourses", translated from Greek, by the 11-12th century³⁴: Isaac of Monteluca, hermit in the neighbourhood of Spoleto, correspondent of Pope Gregory the Dialogue in his "Dialogues"³⁵ (Presumably, Isaac had come to Italy without knowing his disciples and would have changed his name sometime around 451, in the early years of the domination of the Goths, and would have lived up to 553. He would have created a real Thebaid in Western variant³⁶); and a particular elder, Isaac of Antioch, who's timing was during Emperor Leo I (454-474)³⁷. The scholar, J.B. Chabot, author of the first scientific study on Isaac in a doctoral thesis³⁸, places Isaac at the end of the 5th century and pleads for his Chalcedonian orthodoxy. But later on, after other findings, his position will be changed. Thus, until the early 20th century, Isaac "enjoyed" more biographies.

J.B. Chabot, who initially placed Isaac at the end of the 5th century, is the one who discovered the historical document that will definitively allow for his identification with Isaac, bishop of Niniveh in the 7th century. There are two short biographical notes – the first one attributed to Metropolitan Isho'dnah of Basra, dated 860-870 AD, "The Book of Chastity" (*Liber castitatis*³⁹) – a brief history of monasticism in Mesopotamia – 140 spiritual

Miller (transl.), *The Ascetical Homilies of St Isaac the Syrian*, Boston, Holy Transfiguration Monastery, 1984, p. lxiii-lxiv).

³² *Bibliotheca Orientalis Clementino-Vaticana I*, Roma, 1719, p. 446.

³³ Here, St. Isaac is presented as a Syrian from Nineveh region, who enters from a young age with his brother in the Monastery of Mar Mattai (Monophysite) in the same region. After a while, he withdraws into the wilderness, and his brother becomes abbot of the monastery. The latter is always trying to bring him back to the monastery, but without success. Through a revelation from above he is ordained bishop of Nineveh. But on the day of his ordination, he faces an altercation between a creditor and his debtor. Trying unsuccessfully to resolve the dispute by recourse to the Gospel, the bishop decides to leave the see, fearing to lose his inner peace, because of his bishopric duty, and withdraws into the wilderness, where he remained until his death, writing his spiritual discourses (cf. "Ieromonahul Nichifor Theotoche către cititori/ Nicephorus Theotokis to his readers", in *Filocalia X*, Bucharest, EIBMBOR, 1981, p. 13-14).

³⁴ Edited at Venice, 1506; Lyon, 1720, *Bibliotheca Patrum XI* and J.P. Migne, PG 86/1, 811-888.

³⁵ PL 77, 244B – 248D.

³⁶ Cf. *Ieromonahul Nichifor Theotoche către cititori*, p. 16-17.

³⁷ Cf. *Ieromonahul Nichifor Theotoche către cititori*, p. 19.

³⁸ *De S. Isaaci Ninivite vite, scripta et doctrina*, Paris, 1892.

³⁹ ܬܝܚܝܬܐ ܕܝܫܘܕܢܐ.

fathers, founders of the Church of the East (Isaac note 124)⁴⁰, edited and translated in Latin by J.B. Chabot in 1896, and the second one edited and published in 1904 by the West Syriac Patriarch united with Rome, Ignatius Ephraim II Rahmani (1848-1929), scholar and orientalist liturgist, in his monumental “*Studia Syriaca*”⁴¹, biographical information found in a manuscript dated 1471-1472.

The biographical notes mention that he was born in Beth Qatraye⁴², on the Western shore of the Persian Gulf. He studied the Holy Scriptures, became a monk and master of Christian teaching. Giwargis (George), Catholicos of the Persian Church (661-681), consecrated him bishop of Niniveh (Mosul)⁴³. Isaac led the diocese for only 5 months. Because he did not feel at ease in this position, he asked the patriarch to dismiss him⁴⁴. We also learn the name of his predecessor and his successor, Moses respectively Sabrisho (the latter also withdrew into the wilderness). After he retired from the bishopric see of Niniveh, Isaac came back to his original way of living. First he spent some time with other hermits in the mountains of Huzistan, before retiring to the monastery of Rabban Shabur (its founder lived earlier, in the same 7th century). It is interesting that two other great contemporary writers have been associated with this monastery – Dadisho, who also comes from Bet Qatraye, and Simon, the author of the “Book of Grace”⁴⁵, sometimes erroneously attributed to Isaac. Dadisho is the author of two important commentaries dedicated to two monastic writings – “The Asketicon of Abba Isaiah” and “The Paradise of the Fathers” (Egyptian), compiled by Henanisho, as well as a “Discourse on Silence”. All three men have lived a hermitical life in the vicinity of the monastery, and probably attended the Holy Mass on Saturday nights and Sundays, after a widespread practice within the Eastern monastic tradition. He read a lot, not only the Holy Bible, but also the works of famous teachers of the Church such as Basil the Great, Evagrius, Pseudo Dionysius the Areopagites, Theodore of Mopsuestia, Ephraim the Syrian, Diodor of Tarsos. Both stories speak about his blindness in old age and that he was buried in the monastery of Rabban Shabur. Assuming he was elected

⁴⁰ Jesudenah, évêque de Baçrah, *Livre de la chasteté composé par Jésudenah, évêque de Basrah*, publié et traduit par Jean Baptiste Chabot, Rome, 1896, p. 63-64 (53-54).

⁴¹ Ephraim II Rahmani, *Studia Syriaca*, vol. I, Beirut, Deir el-Sharf, 1904, p. ٣٢ (32-33).

⁴² The region was known as an intellectual centre of the Church of the East in the early seventh century, producing a number of scholars and writers. One of them is the exegete Gabriel of Qatar, mentioned in this note, known from other sources as well.

⁴³ Since it is known that he travelled to Beth Qatraye in 676, supposedly he took the monk Isaac with him on this occasion to the monastery of Bet Abe (The localisation of this monastery is still disputed by the contemporary scholars. See Jean Maurice Fiey, *Assyrie Chrétienne I*, Beyrouth Dar El-Machreq, 1965-1968, p. 236-248).

⁴⁴ Isho'denah discrete states that “only God knows the reason for his resignation” just five months after his ordination, while the second story puts “acuteness of his intellect and his extraordinary zeal” as the reason for his withdrawal, suggesting Isaac’s strict standards for the administration of the diocese.

⁴⁵ ܡܠܟܐ ܕܡܪܝܢܐ.

bishop while he was still at the age of thirty or forty, means he would have been born about 630 AD and had lived around eighty years. This brings us to the conclusion that his death would have occurred probably in the second decade of the 8th century.

With the publication of the two biographical items of information, Chabot himself will say that Isaac of Nineveh was undeniably “Nestorian and Nestorian bishop”⁴⁶. From now on, any information on Isaac’s life will comply with these two new pieces of information, starting with “The History of Syriac literature”⁴⁷, in 1922, of the orientalist and liturgist Anton Baumstark. The first comprehensive monograph on the personality of Isaac of Nineveh will appear only in the 70s, and is due to the Maronite scholar Elie Khalifé-Hachem in the “Dictionnaire de Spiritualité, ascétique et mystique”⁴⁸.

Abdisho of Nisibis in his “Catalogue of Church Writers” gives us extra information that does not appear in the two biographical notes, on Isaac’s bibliography – the number of volumes: “Isaac of Nineveh wrote seven volumes about the way of the spiritual experience, divine mysteries, justice and welfare”⁴⁹.

Next to this information, one can add other internal testimonies, probably autobiographical notes inserted in the text in the third person. For example, in the first collection, discourse 35, Isaac talks about a brother who, elected bishop, left his hermitage and, as a consequence, attributes the loss of grace precisely to this change of lifestyle⁵⁰. A second example may be found in the 18th discourse of the same collection, where he speaks about a diligent monastic who wants to adopt a habit of false madness, but his spiritual father discourages him, arguing that the weaker brethren in faith could be scandalized by such asceticism, because “nobody knows thee in these regions, neither do people know what thy fame is”⁵¹.

Metropolitan Isho’denah adds in his short note an interesting detail, that “three points were not accepted by many” and Daniel bar Tubanitha, bishop of Bet Garmai, had been scandalised by these propositions, and concludes by joining Isaac’s name to that of Joseph Hazzaya, John Dalyatha and John of Apamea, while expressing the idea that the people from

⁴⁶ Jean Baptiste Chabot, *De S. Isaaci Ninivite vita, scripta et doctrina*, Paris, 1892, p. 26. The final confirmation comes across with the publication of Isaac’s first collection by Paul Bedjan: “Il est avéré qu’Isaac de Ninive était nestorien: la tradition et le tonne même de ses écrits on témoignent suffisamment” (Mar Isaacus Ninivita, *De perfectione religiosa*, Paris-Leipzig, 1909, p. IV-V).

⁴⁷ *Geschichte der syrischen Literatur*, Bonn, 1922, p. 233-235.

⁴⁸ „Isaac de Ninive”, in *Dictionnaire de spiritualité* VII, 50-51, 1971, col. 2041-2054.

⁴⁹ Abdisho de Nisibe, *Scriptorum Ecclesiasticorum Catalogus*, in J.S. Assemani, *Bibliotheca Orientalis Clementino-Vaticana*, III, Romae, Propaganda Fidae, 1725, p. 104.

⁵⁰ I, 35, p. 167. This monastic exegesis might be very well a common situation described in the “Paradise of the Fathers”, while referring to the hermit’s life.

⁵¹ I, 18, p. 97.

the interior manifested great envy against the first one, as originating out of their region. This association brings some interrogatives on which we will deal at large in the next pages. Abdisho of Nisibis advocates the existence of a response of Bishop Daniel to Isaac's challenging points – "Solutions to the questions of the fifth volume of Isaac's work"⁵², today lost. We cannot know exactly what these teachings were about, but the most plausible hypothesis refers to Isaac's insistence on God's infinite mercy at the expense of justice and universalism of salvation, based on His eternal and unchanging love. Hanun Ibn Yuhanna Ibn as-Salt⁵³, an East Syriac monk who lived in the 9th century and translated some of Isaac's short sentences in Arabic, in three letters on "How to read and understand St. Isaac", reveals a possible track. It records that the spiritual fathers forbade the reading of Isaac to the younger brothers so as "not to smooth the path of sin". But this was not the case for those mature. In addition, Ibn as-Salt draws up a list of six theses attributed to Isaac, dissonant with classical traditional theology⁵⁴. In the same line, he adds a piece of valuable information – Catholicos Yohanna II Ben Narsai (884-892), being asked by Abu al-'Abbas 'Isa Ibn Zayd Ibn Abi Malik about Isaac's writings and the opinion of Bishop Daniel on them, he asserts: "Mar Isaac speaks the language of the beings in Heaven and Daniel speaks the language of the beings of earth"⁵⁵, again underlying the subtlety and profoundness of his theological vision.

1.2 The spreading of Isaac's discourses

In the second section of this introductory chapter we will deal with Isaac's writings and their spreading out in different confessional territories. In an attempt to reconstruct the original Syriac, we will use the brief biographies that we have so far or other lapidary information from the later authors. In the first short biography of the East-Syriac origin, published by Chabot, one can learn that "Isaac composed *books* on the way of life of solitaries", without mentioning their number. In the second source, dated 15th century, published by Rahmani, the unknown author gives more information. He affirms that Isaac "composed *five* volumes, which are still known today, full of good teaching". And more, the Catalogue of Abdisho of Nisibis speaks about "*seven* books on spiritual experience, divine

⁵² Abdisho de Nisibe, *Scriptorum Ecclesiasticorum Catalogus*, p. 174.

⁵³ His monastery at that time was Mar Jonah ad al-Anbar, founded by an hermit with a homonym name in the 7th century (for details see J. M. Fiey, *Assyrie chrétienne III- Bé Garmaï Bet Aramayé et Maishan nestoriens*, Dar El-Machreq Éditeurs, Bayrouth, 1968, p. 237-238).

⁵⁴ See *Traité religieux, philosophique et moraux, extraits des oeuvres d'Isaac de Ninive (VIIe siècle) par Ibn as-Salt (IXe siècle)*, P. Sbath éd., Imp. 'Al-Chark', Le Caire, 1934, p. 16-19.

⁵⁵ *Traité religieux, philosophique et moraux*, p. 109.

mysteries, justice and welfare”⁵⁶. Out of these, we have now 140 discourses divided into three parts: 82 in the first part, 41 in the second and 17 discourses in the third part⁵⁷.

The Syriac First Part, by the late eighth or early ninth century, reached the Orthodox Monastery of Mar Sabba of Jerusalem, where it has been translated into Greek by two monks, Abramios and Patrikios. This translation ensured that over the course of subsequent centuries Isaac has had a wide readership through secondary translations into many different languages⁵⁸: 9th century into Arabic, 10th century into Georgian, followed in the next century by a second Georgian and Arabic translation, whence in due course an Ethiopic translation was made, from which in turn, one in Amharic; a Slavonic translation by the disciples of Saint Gregory of Sinai 14th century, and it was probably in the same century that a Latin translation of 25 Discourses was made. By the end of the 15th century the Latin text had been translated into Catalan, French, Italian, Portuguese and Spanish. The publication in 1770 of the Greek text by the hieromonk Nikephoros Theotokis gave rise, in the early nineteenth century, to a second translation into Slavonic, by Paisiy Velichkovsky, 1812, and one into Romanian by two of Velichkovsky’s disciples, in 1819. Russian and Modern Greek translations followed later in the nineteenth century. The publication of the full Syriac text of the First Part in 1909 opened the list of modern translations⁵⁹. The Second and the Third Part manuscripts have been rediscovered in the 80s and, from that very moment, many translations into modern languages have been made⁶⁰.

⁵⁶ J.S. Assemani, *Bibliotheca Orientalis* III/1, p. 104.

⁵⁷ See also the two homilies edited and translated by Sabino Chialà as belonging to “The Fifth” Isaac’s collection, and yet there are some interrogatives around its paternity (“Due discorsi ritrovati della *Quinta parte* di Isacco di Ninive?”, *Orientalia Christiana Periodica*, 79 (2013) 1, p. 61-112). A survey of the manuscripts of Isaac’s writings has been done recently by Grigory Kessel, “The Manuscript Heritage of Isaac of Niniveh. A Survey of Syriac Manuscripts”, *The Syriac Writers of Qatar in the Seventh Century*, Gorgias Press, 2014, p. 71-92.

⁵⁸ For an overview, see Sebastian Brock, “From Qatar to Tokyo, by way of Mar Saba: the translations of Isaac of Beth Qatraye (Isaac the Syrian)”, in *Aram* 11-12 (1999-2000), p. 475-484; Idem, “Syriac into Greek at Mar Saba: the translation of Isaac the Syrian”, in J. Patrich (ed.), *The Sabaite Heritage in the Orthodox Church from the Fifth Century to the Present*, OLA 98, Louvain, 2001, p. 201-208; Idem, “Aspects œcuméniques de saint Isaac le Syrien”, in *Patrimoine Syriaque VI. Le monachisme du VIIe siècle jusqu’à nos jours*, I, CERO, Antelias, 1999, p. 121-127; Idem, “Crossing the boundaries: an ecumenical role played by Syriac monastic literature”, in M. Bielawski and D. Hombergen (eds), *Il monachesimo tra eredità e aperture*, Studia Anselmiana 140 (2004), p. 221-238.

⁵⁹ In Japanese (Fuku Horie, Tokyo 1909), Russian (1911, Holy Trinity Lavra of Saint Sergius, by Sobolevsky), English (Dana Miller, Transfiguration Monastery, Boston 1984), Italian (M. Gallo and P. Bettolo, Rome, 1984), a selection of ten sermons (Greek, by Photis Kontoglu, Athens 1994), French (Jacques Touraille, Paris 1991), Romanian (Dumitru Stăniloae, *Philokalia* X, 1981), Arabic (Atallah Ishaq, Beirut, 1983), Greek (Marcel Pirard, 2011).

⁶⁰ The “Second Part”: Italian (partial, P. Bettolo, 1990), English (partial, S. Brock, 1995, 1997), Russian (partial, H. Alfeyev, 1998), French (A. Louf, 2003), Romanian (I. Ică, 2003), Catalan (M. Nin and S. Chialà, 2003), Greek (N. Kavvadas, 2006); “The Third Part”: Italian (S. Chialà, 2004), Romanian (I. Ică Jr., 2005), French (A. Louf, 2010). For the complete bibliographical entries see the bibliographical list below.

1.3 The theological world of Isaac of Niniveh

The last section of this chapter will be dedicated to Isaac's theological sources⁶¹. One can easily identify the traces of some favourite authors who had influenced him. It is about Evagrius of Pontus, Theodore of Mopsuestia, John the Solitary (of Apamea) and Pseudo Macarius.

The first one, Evagrius of Pontus (346-399)⁶², is designated by Isaac with the appellatives like "holy", "blessed", "enlightener of mind", "sage among the saints", "prince of Gnostics". Isaac explicitly cites him 14 times in the First part of his writings and many times implicitly. The same occurs in the Second (18 times) and Third collection (4 times). Evagrian terminology is found everywhere and is crucial to Isaac's discourse. Although he was condemned together with Origen, his mentor, at the Fifth Ecumenical Council (553), and his works in Greek destroyed, they were conserved in Syriac, and the author was recognized among the Church Fathers, and yet "an adapted Evagrius"⁶³. Isaac does not quote him as a speculative, but as an ascetic scholar who managed to systematize in a technical language the Christian spiritual experience. To summarize, we will present a few specific Evagrian themes, part of the technical language used by Isaac to describe his spiritual vision.

In the space of contemplation/ *theoria*⁶⁴, we will evoke the contemplation of bodily beings⁶⁵, divided into two types: by the means of human reason enlightened by God, or following the direct intuition of God's light and intervention; contemplation of incorporeal beings⁶⁶; spiritual contemplation⁶⁷ – vision of the ineffable glory of God; contemplation of the Holy Trinity⁶⁸ – the kingdom of God; the vision of their own rational nature during the contemplation of the Holy Trinity and the spiritual world, the vision of the beauty of our own nature contemplated in the light without form and in his creative and providential action.

⁶¹ We will use mostly in this subchapter the synthesis made by Robert Beulay, *La lumière sans forme. Introduction à l'étude de la mystique chrétienne syro-orientale*, Chevtogne, 1987; Elie Khalifé Hachem, "Isaac de Ninive", *Dictionnaire de Spiritualité* VII, col. 2041-2054; S. Chialà, *Dall'asceti eremitica alla misericordia infinita. Ricerche su Isaaco di Ninive e la sua fortuna*, Biblioteca della rivista di storia e letteratura religiosa XIV, Firenze, Olschki, 2002, p. 85-119.

⁶² For details see Sebastian Brock, "Discerning the Evagrian in the writings of Isaac of Niniveh: a preliminary investigation", in *Adamantius* 15 (2009), p. 60-72; Sabino Chialà, "Evagrio il Pontico negli scritti di Isacco di Ninive", in *Adamantius*, 15 (2009), p. 73-84; Théofane Durel, "Sur la doctryne mystique de Saint Isaac le Syrien", in *Contacts*, Paris, 156 (1991), p. 246-261 (here 251-253); Antoine Guillaumont, "Le *Kephalaia Gnostika* d'Évagre le Pontique et l'histoire de l'origénisme chez les Grecs et les syriens", in *Patristica Soborniensia* 5, Paris, 1962.

⁶³ Cf. Sabino Chialà, *Dall'asceti eremitica*, p. 102.

⁶⁴ ܠܝܐܪܝܬܐ.

⁶⁵ ܠܡܥܠܐ ܝܠܝܐܪܝܬܐ.

⁶⁶ ܠܡܥܠܐ ܠܝܠܝܐܪܝܬܐ.

⁶⁷ ܠܡܥܠܐ ܠܝܠܝܐܪܝܬܐ.

⁶⁸ ܠܡܥܠܐ ܠܝܠܝܐܪܝܬܐ.

Regarding the terminology related to prayer, Isaac assumes the difference Evagrius makes between pure prayer⁶⁹, followed by prayer spiritual⁷⁰, and yet giving a personal reading. If for Evagrius spiritual prayer remains within the boundaries of what is called prayer, for Isaac, spiritual prayer, improperly so called, is stripped of any representations and any movements, in a perfect state of impassivity (see the role of the Holy Spirit). He technically calls it non-prayer⁷¹.

The third major area in Isaac's discourses where his influence clearly manifests is Evagrius' anthropological system, which, apparently, speaks of a tripartite division – body, soul and mind, the foundation of the spiritual ascent in three stages: practical⁷² and gnostical⁷³ with its two levels – physics⁷⁴ and theology⁷⁵. Very important in this division is that Isaac takes over and keeps Evagrius' distinction between these three elements, but eliminates the doctrine of the origin and makes an interesting synthesis between Evagrius and John of Apamea, in the line of Apostle Paul (I Corinthians 15:46-47), as we will detail later.

The second author who has put his mark on the theology of Isaac of Niniveh is Theodore of Mopsuestia (†428)⁷⁶, the “blessed interpreter”. His works are almost all of them lost in the original Greek because of the posthum *damnatio memoriae* of the Fifth Ecumenical Council, together with the Antiochene School, whose representative he was. According to Professor Paolo Bettolo the scheme on which Isaac builds his theological discourse is influenced by the system of Theodore of Mopsuestia, especially the chapter on protology and eschatology. Firstly, like Theodore, Isaac speaks of two catastases⁷⁷ and not three, as we are accustomed in classical theology – the earthly life and the eschatological existence. The first one is pedagogical to the second one, it is assimilated to a school. With Christ's Incarnation we have a foretaste of the second world. In this frame, baptism represents its type and Eucharist makes the human being become participant to this reality. In the same line, Isaac

⁶⁹ ܠܗܘܐ ܠܗܠܐ.

⁷⁰ ܠܗܘܐ ܠܗܠܐ.

⁷¹ See the dispute between Irinée Hausherr, “Par delà l'oraison pure grâce à une coquille. A propos d'un texte d'Evagre”, in *Hésychasme et prière*, Orientalia Christiana Analecta, 176, Roma, p. 8-12 and Elie Khalifè-Hachem, “La prière pure et la prière spirituelle selon Isaac de Ninive”, in *Mémorial Mgr Gabriel Khouri-Sarkis*, Louvain, 1968, p. 157-176.

⁷² ܡܡܬܝܩܐ.

⁷³ ܡܡܬܝܩܐ.

⁷⁴ ܡܡܬܝܩܐ.

⁷⁵ ܡܡܬܝܩܐ.

⁷⁶ See Arthur Vööbus, “Regarding the theological anthropology of Theodore of Mopsuestia”, in *Church History*, 33 (1964) 2, p. 115-124; Sabino Chialá, *Dall'asceti eremitica*, p. 102 et; Nestor Kavvadas, “Some observations on the theological anthropology of Isaac of Niniveh and its sources”, in *Scrinium IV* (2008), p. 147-157. He is quoted more than 45 times in Isaac's discourses.

⁷⁷ ܡܡܬܝܩܐ.

claims that human's mortality is not the result of sin, as he is mortal by nature. Consequently, Incarnation is, besides the destruction of sin and the power of the devil, the revelation of God's love for people – Christ is the prototype of the new reconciled human. By emphasizing the love of God as a permanent reality in the history of creation, protology, soteriology, and, especially, eschatology, Isaac advocates the idea of temporary punishment, specifically citing, next to Diodore of Tarsus, his master Theodore of Mopsuestia. As Sabino Chialà observed, the two sources presented so far, both of them being representative authors belonging to two opponent schools – Alexandrian and Antiochian, are reconciled in Isaac's original synthesis⁷⁸.

We will focus our attention on the third author with a great resonance for Isaac's theological discourse – John the Solitary (Yohannan Ihidaya, of Apamea)⁷⁹, who probably lived in the fifth century⁸⁰. John the Solitary has particular relevance for the East Syriac spirituality – he is the first author who has made an ascetical-mystical synthesis in the Syriac Christian territory. His writings have theorized for the first time the spiritual life within a baptismal and eschatological frame.

We can identify at least three key themes in the theology of Isaac of Niniveh that are undoubtedly borrowed from the author in question. We will shortly mention them: a threefold spiritual life: bodily⁸¹, of the soul⁸² and spiritual⁸³. The bodily stage is determined by corporality – bodily ascetism, avoidance of sin, the prayers and tears are caused by purely human anxieties – it is the state of the servant. The second stage assumes that the soul begins to awaken and achieve some knowledge; to bodily asceticism is added the struggle against the passions of the soul; prayer is neither clean nor continuous, but foretastes them; it is an intermediate stage – of the mercenaries. The spiritual stage requires the knowledge of the “mysteries of the other world”, it represents a foretaste of the new world's perfection; this condition is accompanied by tears of joy, pure and uninterrupted prayer. It is God's gift – the stage of the sons⁸⁴.

⁷⁸ Sabino Chialà, *Dall'ascesi eremitica*, p. 102.

⁷⁹ For more details see: Bruce Bradley, Jean le Solitaire (D'Apamée)”, in *Dictionnaire de Spiritualité*, VIII, col. 764-772; Irinée Hausherr, “Aux origines de la mystique syrienne: Grégoire de Cypre ou Jean de Lycopolis?”, in *Hésychasme et prière*, Roma, 1966, p. 63-86; Idem, “Un grand auteur spirituel retrouvé: Jean d'Apamée”, in *Études de spiritualité orientale*, Rome, 1969, p. 181-216.

⁸⁰ His timing is still disputed by scholars.

⁸¹ ܐܬܝܬܝܬܐ ܕܝܚܝܕܝܐ.

⁸² ܐܬܝܬܝܬܐ ܕܝܚܝܕܝܐ.

⁸³ ܐܬܝܬܝܬܐ ܕܝܚܝܕܝܐ.

⁸⁴ Cf. the synthesis of Robert Beulay, *La lumière sans forme*, p. 118.

In this frame, secondly, the right human pertains to the first two stages, and the perfect human to the latter one. The boundary between the second and the third stage is purity⁸⁵, followed by limpidity⁸⁶, specific to the spiritual human, who already experiences, in the earthly life, the post resurrection state.

The third specific element is the so-called “mystical hope” or “the mystics of God’s expectation”, essential to spiritual life. In this sense, baptism plays a crucial role – it is the image of this hope in the next life, which gives the power to overcoming sin. From this perspective there are two resurrections: the first one experienced in baptism, while the second one at the end of the world.

Regarding the idea of threefold spiritual life, it is important and interesting to note that the bishop of Niniveh makes a synthesis between John of Apamea and Evagrius’ vision. Using Apostle Paul’s insights, John of Apamea proposes a “modal” approach, giving the primacy to the principle that guides the spiritual life in every specific stage, while Evagrius proposes a “philosophical – practical” approach, depending on the support on which the ascetical labour or the contemplation is performed. This means that, when he speaks about bodily stage refers to the fact human is subjected to lust, carnal lifestyle; then, in the conduct of the soul, human struggles against carnal or psychical passions; during the spiritual conduct human experiences divine vision in the intellectual part of the soul.

Pseudo Macarius⁸⁷ is the fourth author in the development of Isaac’s theological discourse. Regarding his identity, the bishop of Niniveh does not have any doubt – he is St. Macarius of Egypt⁸⁸. Although not explicitly cited, as well as John of Apamea, he is present throughout his work along certain themes, especially in what we call “the Macarian spirit”⁸⁹. The first of these features is what in technical terms we designate by “the mystics of the heart”⁹⁰, “the school of feeling or the supernatural conscious”⁹¹. This means the heart⁹² is the

⁸⁵ ܡܚܝܬܐ.

⁸⁶ ܡܚܝܬܐ.

⁸⁷ For his biography see the synthesis of Robert Waelkens, “Macaire Magnes”, in *Dictionnaire de Spiritualité* X, col. 14-17.

⁸⁸ For Sebastian Brock, Macarius, Pseudo-Macarius or Simeon of Mesopotamia is somebody else than Macarius of Egypt. According to his vision he lived at the end of 7th century in Mesopotamia (Sebastian Brock, „Introduction”, in St. Isaac of Niniveh, *On ascetical life*, St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, New York, 1989, p. 17).

⁸⁹ For details see Théofane Durel, *art. cit.*, p. 254-256.

⁹⁰ Cf. John Meyendorff, *St Grégoire Palamas et la mystique orthodoxe*, Paris, 1959, p. 22.

⁹¹ Cf. Irinée Hausherr, “Les grands courants de la spiritualité orientale”, in *Orientalia Christiana Periodica*, 1 (1935), p. 26.

⁹² ܠܒ.

centre of spiritual life. It is the place of the *nous*⁹³, where dwells the Holy Spirit and imprints the divine likeness. In the pure heart is imprinted and foretasted the new heaven.

The second Macarian feature present in Isaac's theological vision is his "spiritual sensitivity". Macarius is part of a spiritual current characterized, more than the experience of the supernatural by the means of intellectual knowledge, at the rational level, by sensitivity and spiritual affection. Related to this feature we will emphasize two characterizing aspects. Dominant in his work is "the experience of the work of the Holy Spirit", often represented by the image of the "divine fire", that purifies the heart. The very title of his work – "Spiritual Homilies" – indicates the importance he attributes to the work of the Holy Spirit in ascetical life. The second important element refers to "the *feeling* of the work of the Holy Spirit", as absolutely necessary to Christian perfection. The weakness of the senses cannot be cured if the soul has not reached an ecstatic state, achieved by the "feeling" of God. This occurs when the hermit liberates his mind from the crowd of the thoughts and reaches unity and simplicity, and, consequently, purity.

Isaac also quotes or mentions by name a number of other earlier writings, many of which were translations of Greek authors, such as Athanasius the Great, Basil the Great, Diodor of Tarsus, Mark the Monk, Dionysius the Areopagite, the Asketikon of Abba Isaiah, the Apophthegmata of the Egyptian Fathers, and various biographies of saints. The only earlier Syriac writer, whom Isaac mentions by name, is Ephrem, but, at least on one occasion, he quotes the fifth-century poet Narsai, without specifically identifying him.

1.4 Conclusion

Isaac of Niniveh is a very good example of the ecumenical role played by monastic literature. As one can see, belonging to the East Syriac Church (labelled "Nestorian"), he was translated and admired in the Syrian Orthodox Church (Non-Chalcedonian), as well as in the Byzantine Orthodox Church (of Antioch and Alexandria, Greek, Russian, and Slavonic countries, Romanian) and Catholic Church, and it has manifested an important influence even in the Islamic world⁹⁴. His name is written in the calendar of these Churches⁹⁵ and considered

⁹³ *ܢܘܨܝܐ*

⁹⁴ Cf. J. A. Wensinck, "Introduction", in *Mystic Treatises by Isaac of Niniveh translated from Bedjan's Syriac*, p. LV; S. Chialà, *Dall'asceti eremitica*, p. 320-322.

⁹⁵ 13-14 iyar (May) or 19 shebat (February) for the Syrian Orthodox Church, (Cf. F. Nau, *Un martyrologe et douze ménologes syriaque*, Turnhout, Brepols, 1912/ PO 10, p. 78, 110, for the first date; F. Acharya, *Prayer with the harp of the Spirit*, II/1, Vagamon, Kurisumala Ashram, 1982, p. 612, 622, for the second date; August 23 for the Maronite Church (Cf. M. Hayek, *Liturgie maronite. Histoire et textes eucharistiques*, Paris: Mame, 1964, p. 124); February 19 in the Syrian Catholic Fenqitho (Cf. Kurisumala Ashram, *Prayer with the Harp of the Spirit: The Crown of the Year* (1982-6), Vagamon, Kerala, II/1, p. 612-622); January 28 for the Byzantine Church (Greek, Russian, Romanian,

protector for some monasteries or churches⁹⁶. Lastly, his work was base for many spiritual renewals, revivals and reformations⁹⁷, coming to nowadays.

Georgian, Serbian and Bulgarian, Cf. *Le synaxaire. Vie des Saints de l'Eglise Orthodoxe. Tome Second: Décembre-Janvier*, Thessalonique: To Parivoli tis Panaghias, 1988, p. 539-541).

⁹⁶ For instance: an Assyrian monastery in Mosul, patron of an Old Calendarist skete in USA, an inter-Orthodox parish in Helsinki, an Anglican Hermitage in New Zealand, a Greek Orthodox Parish in Qatar etc.

⁹⁷ St. Symeon the New Theologian and Paul Everghetinos (11th century), Giovanni di Peckham, Pietro di Giovanni Olivi, Angelo Clareno and Domenico Cavalca (13-14th century), Gregory the Sinaitis (14th century), Nil Sorskij (15th century), Nikephoros Theotokis and Paisij Velicikovskij (18th century), Matta al Meskin and Vasileios Gondikakis (20th century) etc.

2. Isaac of Niniveh's Christology and the internal disputes within the East Syriac community between the 6th to the 8th centuries

Before entering directly into the very topic of my research, one essential aspect to deal with is the Christological perspective of Isaac of Niniveh in the context of the official theology of the East Syriac Church he belonged to. The great importance of this issue comes out of the very fact that Christology offers the theological background for the process of knowledge, the researched theme, as we will underline later on.

The first observation one can underline is that Isaac disliked the doctrinal disputes and consequently he did not really intervene in the Christological discussions⁹⁸. He is quite discrete and even silent when comes about the polemic doctrinal issues that occurred in the Church life of his time. Therefore one can hardly find salient points in Isaac's works regarding this topic. It is easy to observe his attitude in the admonishment he addresses against those who dogmatise and support doctrinal discussions – the right way of acting is the practice of virtue. We will give two suggestive examples: "Confound critics by the power of thy virtues, not by word; and the imprudence of those who will not be persuaded by the peacefulness of thy lips, not by sound"⁹⁹; or "When thou becomes angry at anyone and zealous for the sake of faith be cautious"¹⁰⁰.

The disputes around orthodoxy prove, in his opinion, that the truth has not been yet achieved: "The one who seems to be zealous towards men because of the truth, he has not yet learned what the truth is"¹⁰¹. This argument can be supported by the absence in his discourses of the problematic phraseology that generated conflicts in matter of Christology in the community he belonged to and by the historical information that we have. We will address both the issues in the next few pages.

2.1 Isaac's Christological phraseology

We will firstly refer to the language the bishop of Niniveh employs for expounding his Christological vision. One can affirm that he uses the terminology specific to his East Syriac theological tradition, in particular inherited from Theodore of Mopsuestia, but with cautiousness and interpreted. We will give some significant examples, divided into two important categories. Firstly, a frequent expression refers to the description of the body of

⁹⁸ Michael Morony speaks about the mystical ecumenism professed by Isaac of Niniveh. For details see M. Morony, *Iraq after the Muslim Conquest*, Gorgias Press, 2005, p. 380.

⁹⁹ I, 4, p. 33.

¹⁰⁰ I, 5, p. 55.

¹⁰¹ II, 3.4, 77.

Christ as “temple/tabernacle of the divinity”: the human nature¹⁰², borrowed by Christ, became “a sanctuary”¹⁰³, “a temple for His divinity”¹⁰⁴, or “a glorious Tabernacle of His eternal being”¹⁰⁵; “a temple made of flesh”¹⁰⁶ or an abode – “the Man whom Divinity took from us for his abode”¹⁰⁷... the Man who completely became its temple”¹⁰⁸; “the divinity”¹⁰⁹ chose to dwell¹¹⁰ in man... like in a temple”¹¹¹. This imagery has perfect correspondence in the New Testament. It is also true that soon after the Christological conflicts, it was dropped by the Byzantine or the West Syriac theology, but, anyhow, in the early theology it was indiscriminately used.

A second specific expression refers to the description of Christ’s humanity as the “garment of divinity”¹¹², or the idea of God being “clothed” in humanity – “the Creator is clothed in human being”¹¹³. Professor Sebastian Brock has studied in detail what one might call “the theology of clothing” in the Syriac tradition and showed that this expression has a long story in the East Syriac theology, starting with the Bible itself¹¹⁴. In short, one can say that Adam was ‘clothed’ in light and glory (Genesis 3:21). After the fall, he was stripped of his robe. Christ is the one who re-clothed mankind with the robe of glory. There are three essential moments in this process: the Nativity, the Baptism and the Descent/Resurrection and, correspondently, three wombs – of Virgin Mary, of Jordan¹¹⁵ and of Sheol¹¹⁶. We will be dealing more with this expression later on, when we intend to analyse the “robe of glory” in the context of the divine knowledge. Now we will only point to the use of this type of theology when speaking about incarnation.

Christ is the one who “put on” the Adam’s body. Speaking about the Logos, in the Greek New Testament there is no expression of this kind, but in the Syriac translation one can

¹⁰² ܡܢܚܐ.

¹⁰³ ܡܢܚܐ ܕܚܝܐ.

¹⁰⁴ ܡܢܚܐ ܕܚܝܐ ܕܡܢܚܐ ܕܚܝܐ.

¹⁰⁵ ܡܢܚܐ ܕܚܝܐ ܕܡܢܚܐ ܕܚܝܐ ; II, 5,1.

¹⁰⁶ ܡܢܚܐ ܕܚܝܐ ; See John 2:19-21; II, 5,1. Narsai also uses this expression (A. Mingana, *Narsai Doctoris Syri Homiliae et Carmina I-II*, Mosul, 1905, II, 3) of great importance for the East Syriac theology.

¹⁰⁷ ܡܢܚܐ.

¹⁰⁸ ܡܢܚܐ ; II, 11,12.

¹⁰⁹ ܡܢܚܐ.

¹¹⁰ ܡܢܚܐ.

¹¹¹ ܡܢܚܐ ; II, 11,12; dwelling – II, 5,6.

¹¹² ܡܢܚܐ ܕܚܝܐ ; II, 11,24; see also St Ephraim (Ephraim, *H. de Fide* 19:2, *H. de Nativitate* 3:20/ For details: Sebastian Brock, “Clothing Metaphors as a Means of Theological Expression in Syriac Tradition”, in *Studies in Syriac Christianity*, Variorum, 1992, XI, p. 11-38 (here 11-13).

¹¹³ ܡܢܚܐ ܕܚܝܐ ; II, 11,28.

¹¹⁴ For the first time this expression was used by E. Peterson, “Theologie des Kleides”, *Benediktinische Monatsschrift*, 19 (1934), p. 347-356.

¹¹⁵ One can easily identify the sacramental dimension of Syriac theology.

¹¹⁶ S. Brock, *Clothing Metaphors*, p. 11-13.

find it in Hebrew 5:7 (“being clothed in the flesh”¹¹⁷) and 10:5 (“you clothed me in a body”¹¹⁸, quoting the prophecy of Psalm 40). Then, it appears in almost all Syriac early writers (Acts of Thomas, Acts of John, Aphrahat, Ephraim, Doctrina Addai¹¹⁹), but in a generic sense. Despite the fact that some might believe that only in early Syriac tradition does the description of incarnation as “putting on the body” appear, one can also find it at some other patristic authors like Melito of Sardis, Hippolytus and Tertulian¹²⁰.

The problem appeared when this expression was ambiguously understood as “put on man” or “put on a man”. One can find this situation for the first time in Theodore’s Syriac translation of the “Catechetical Homilies” (III.11), where he asserts: “for our salvation he put on (a) man and dwelt in him”. This phraseology became suspicious and one can identify such an attitude at Philoxenos of Mabbug, in the Commentary on the Prologue of John, tangentially analysing the Hebrew 7:5 in Peshitta translation. He complains that instead of translating Paul’s word, they preferred to give a Nestorian reading, in the sense of casting on the Word a body like a garment on an ordinary body or as a purple on the emperor¹²¹. Two authors belonging to the same Antiochene tradition used this type of phraseology as well – Cyrus of Edessa (“robe of humanity”) and Narsai (“robe of the body”). Professor Brock argues that the origin of this expression should be searched in the popular widespread conceptions (probably orphic and pythagorean) that the soul is clothed in the body and that the latter one is the vestment of the former¹²².

What is more important vis-à-vis this usage refers to the translation of the Nicene Creed in the Synod of Seleucia, 410. In the Syriac early translations, kept by the West Syriac recension, the term *σαρκωθέντα* was translated with the phraseology involving the verb ܩܠܬܐ (put on, clothing). At this point, it is at least strange that not the West Syriac, but the East Syriac substituted ܩܠܬܐ with ܩܠܬܐ ܕܥܡܐ (was embodied) and ܩܠܬܐ ܕܥܡܐ (inhominated): *who for the sake of us human beings and for the sake of our salvation came down from heaven and was*

¹¹⁷ Greek: *in the days of his flesh*.

¹¹⁸ Greek: *you prepared a body for me*.

¹¹⁹ For generic uses see S. Brock, *Clothing metaphors*, p. 23-24 (“You are the Son and you put on a body” – *Acts of Thomas*, Ed. W. Wright, p. 217; “Jesus, because he put on a body and humbled himself, delivered the Church and her children from death” – *Aphrahat’s Demonstrations. A Conversation with the Jews in Mesopotamia*, CSCO 642/ 129, XXI.20; “The Word of the Most High came down and put on a weak body” – Ephrem, *HdVIRG* XXIX.1.1-2; “Even though he put on this body, he was still God with his Father” – G. Philips, *Doctrina Addai, The Doctrine of Addai, the Apostle*, London, Truber and Co, 1876, p. 7. See also “put on”: our body, our humanity, our form, our nature etc).

¹²⁰ For linguistically illustrative details see S. Brock, *Clothing Metaphors*, p. 16, 23-26.

¹²¹ *Commentaire du prologue johannique, syriaque et français*, ed. by André de Halleux, CSCO, 380-381 (165-166), Louvain, 1977, 165f., p. 53-54.

¹²² S. Brock, *Clothing metaphors*, p. 17-18.

embodied (ܡܠܬܐ ܕܝܢܐ) and inhumanized (ܡܠܬܐ ܕܝܢܐ), and he suffered¹²³. This usage could offer ambivalent interpretation – generically or as a particular man. Interesting and useful to underline is that one can hardly find this phrase in early Syriac writers. It appears first, as we have noticed above, in Theodore of Mopsuestia’s writings and, in his line, in some other East Syriac writers. We can conclude this digression asserting that, by using a specific phraseology that involves both the idea of “temple” and “clothing” Isaac is faithful to his own theological tradition. Brock argues that this phraseology is archaic and it should be read not in isolation and in a restrictive way, but “each image should be used in conjunction with a variety of others as well, seeing that no single image can provide an adequate analogy to the nature of the union of the two natures in Christ”¹²⁴.

When dealing with the incarnated Word, Isaac uses two of the terms implied in the Christological disputes, omitting exactly the one that created problems (ܡܠܬܐ -hypostasis). In the frame of his own theological tradition, he speaks about two natures (ܡܠܬܐ) united in one person (ܡܠܬܐ ܕܝܢܐ). This union makes the humanity of Christ be venerated together with His divinity. I will render below the text quote that suggestively supports the coexistence of the two natures, working in union:

We do not hesitate to call the humanity of our Lord – He being truly man – God and Creator and Lord; or to apply to Him in divine fashion the statement that ‘By His hands the world was established and everything was created... He granted to him that he should be worshipped with Him indistinguishably, with a single act of worship for the Man who became Lord and for the divinity equally, while the (two) natures¹²⁵ are preserved with their properties, without being any difference in honour¹²⁶.

Sebastian Brock argues that among the East Syriac councils only two address the issue of properties. That would be the council under Catholicos Joseph (554) and that of 612, during Babai the Great. It is worth quoting a few lines from the definition given by the former one, which seems to echo the Chalcedonian definition: “We preserve the upright confession of the two natures in Christ¹²⁷ that is His divinity¹²⁸ and His humanity¹²⁹. And we preserve the

¹²³ *Synodicon Orientale ou Recueil de Synodes Nestoriens*, ed. and transl. by J.B. Chabot, Paris, 1902, [SO] 23/262 (for the English translation see S. Brock, “The Christology of the Church of the East in the Synods of the fifth to early seventh centuries. Preliminary considerations and materials”, in S. Brock, *Studies in Syriac Christianity. History, Literature and Theology*, Variorum 1992, p. 133).

¹²⁴ S. Brock, *The Christology of the Church of the East*, p. 132.

¹²⁵ ܡܠܬܐ.

¹²⁶ II, 11,21

¹²⁷ ܡܠܬܐ ܕܝܢܐ ܡܠܬܐ ܕܝܢܐ.

¹²⁸ ܡܠܬܐ ܕܝܢܐ ܡܠܬܐ ܕܝܢܐ.

¹²⁹ ܡܠܬܐ ܕܝܢܐ.

characteristics¹³⁰ of the natures by which we get rid of confusion, alteration and change” and it adds an anathematization of those who speak about two Christs and two Sons¹³¹.

Having observed that Isaac stresses the existence of the two natures in Christ, reflecting the definition of the councils, it is necessary to make a step forward trying to identify the way they connect themselves in the context of the Christological dyophysite doctrine of his tradition. As one could have already grasped, Isaac is faithful to the East Syriac Christology when using both the terms “nature” and “person” and, omitting the third problematic term, “qnoma”, seems to avoid any theological debate regarding the Monophysites.

In the Second collection there is one important fragment where the bishop of Niniveh presents a synthetic panorama of his Christological vision. One can identify the two terms involved in the theological discussions, but the crucial one (*qnoma*) is absent. There he insists on the fact that, in the union, each nature keeps its own properties, to avoid any confusion of natures. His definition is clearly against the West Syriac Christology, when stressing that Christ is not in one nature:

Il Cristo Signore è sia il primogenito¹³², sia l'unigenito¹³³. Le due cose infatti non sono in un'unica natura¹³⁴, perché diviene primogenito di molti fratelli, ma (è) unigenito per non esservi altra generazione prima e dopo di lui. Le due cose si avverano (rispettivamente) in Dio e nell'uomo¹³⁵, che furono uniti in una persona¹³⁶, senza che si confondessero le (proprietà) della natura per l'unione¹³⁷.

From all these examples one may identify that Isaac, describing the unity of God and human in Christ, underlines the distinction of the two natures, so as to preserve the proprieties from confusion. God willingly dwelt in Jesus and because of his sacrifice he was lifted up to God the Word and he was gifted with the same honour. This is the crucial point for his mystical theology, because the way he expresses the union of natures in Christ conditions the possibility of knowing God. Isaac asserts that: “All that applies to (the Man) is raised up to (the Word) who accepts it for himself, having willed to make Him share in this honour... so we have acquired an accurate knowledge¹³⁸ of the Creator”¹³⁹.

¹³⁰ ܐܬܬܐܬܐܪܬܐ.

¹³¹ SO, p. 97-98.

¹³² ܐܘܬܝܪܐ.

¹³³ ܐܘܬܝܪܐ.

¹³⁴ ܐܬܬܐܬܐܪܬܐ.

¹³⁵ ܐܬܬܐܬܐܪܬܐ ܐܬܬܐܬܐܪܬܐ ܐܬܬܐܬܐܪܬܐ.

¹³⁶ ܐܬܬܐܬܐܪܬܐ.

¹³⁷ ܐܬܬܐܬܐܪܬܐ ; II, 3.1,49.

¹³⁸ ܐܬܬܐܬܐܪܬܐ.

¹³⁹ II, 11,22.

The soteriological role of Incarnation is lectured in the same frame of the East Syriac tradition. When speaking about salvation, in particular, the Alexandrine tradition uses the term “deification” (theosis), based on the union of human with the divine nature and the “communicatio idiomatum” in the person of Christ. Despite the firm distinction of the natures in Christ, Isaac uses the same term to describe the process of knowledge, as we will detail later, in a different perspective and, yet, not contradictorily. The sacrifice, the resurrection and the ascension of Christ opened up the way of ascending to God to human nature. Using the words of Hilarion Alfeyev, while interpreting Isaac’s theology, deification is “perceived dynamically, as an ascent of the human being, together with the whole created world, to divine glory, holiness and light”¹⁴⁰. We will quote below a paragraph where Isaac himself describes the process of salvation inaugurated in Christ’s incarnation and potentially achieved by the whole creation. Here, the author, underlying the universal value of salvation in Christ, points to some expressions strictly connected with the process of knowledge and the theological controversies of his time, that we are going to analyse later on in our research (light and glory).

Amid ineffable splendour (the Father) raised Him to Himself to heaven, to that place that no created being had trod, but whither he had, through his own (action), invited all rational beings, angels and human beings, to that Blessed entry in order to delight in the divine light¹⁴¹ in which was clothed the Man who is filled with all that is holy, who is now with God in ineffable glory and splendour... His intension was to give to all knowledge of his glory¹⁴².

Another important expression implied by Isaac in describing the union of natures in Christ is “voluntary union”, borrowed from the “Book of Heracleidis”¹⁴³ and used in the East Syriac Christology¹⁴⁴. The Word of God incarnated in order “to renew us by the means of voluntary union¹⁴⁵ with the flesh”¹⁴⁶, revealing the way by which human may be raised to God’s mystery¹⁴⁷.

¹⁴⁰ Hilarion Alfeyev, *The Spiritual World of Isaac the Syrian*, Kalamazoo, Cistercian Publications, 2000, p. 57.

¹⁴¹ ܠܗܘܐ ܠܗܘܐ ; This expression also occurs at Evagrius (“Letters”, ed. Frankenberg, *Evagrius Ponticus*, 554-634, Add. 14578 and 17167, 167v), or some contemporary authors like Sahdona (A. de Halleux (ed.), *Martyrius/Sahdona. Oeuvres spirituelles*, CSCO 200-201, 214-215, 252-255, IV, p. 21) and Dadisho (C. Draguet (ed.), *Commentaire du livre d’Abba Isaïe (logoi I-XV)* par Dadišo Qatraya, CSCO, 326-327, XIII, 12).

¹⁴² ܡܠܟܘܬܐ ܠܗܘܐ ; II, 11,29-30 ; Evagrius, *Kepalaia Gnostica* edited by A. Guillaumont, PO 28 (1958), 1, II.55.

¹⁴³ P. Bedjan, *Nestorius. Le livre d’Héraclide de Damas*, Paris, 1910, p. 264.

¹⁴⁴ A. Vaschalde, *Babai Magni Liber de Unione*, CSCO 79-80, p. 91.

¹⁴⁵ ܠܗܘܐ ܠܗܘܐ.

¹⁴⁶ II, 5,7.

¹⁴⁷ One may identify the soteriological accent not in incarnation, in an objective way, but more in the revelation of God as love, developed in a subjective response of human. In fact, this is the very reason of Incarnation (see II, 3.4,78, discussed by I. Hausherr, “Un précurseur de la théorie scotiste sur la fin de l’incarnation Isaac de Ninive”, in *Etudes de Spiritualité Orientale*, Orientalia Christiana Analecta, 183, Roma, 1969, p. 1-5).

Lastly, we will evoke a term used by Isaac, which seems at least unusual and, probably controversial for the East Syriac dyophysitism, despite its long history¹⁴⁸. In order to describe the level of intimacy of creation with God, achieved in the sacrifice of Christ, the bishop of Niniveh uses the term “mingling”¹⁴⁹ of the Creator with the creation. He does not speak about essential unity, and yet he speaks about mingling: “the world has become mingled with God, and creation and Creator have become one”¹⁵⁰.

The conclusion one can draw from this analysis is that the sharp distinction between the natures in the Theodorian tradition is not really present in Isaac’s writings. The uncreated Word and the created man Jesus are one and the same person. Consequently, the union of Christ, which denotes the assumed Man to the Trinity, through union with the Word, represents the fundament for the perfect mingling of the saints with God¹⁵¹. And finally, salvation can be described as the process of the human nature’s ascension to the divine light and glory of the divinity, by following Christ, who, by his union, deified human nature.

2.2 The Christological disputes of Isaac’s time in the East Syriac Church

After this short analysis of the Christological main terminology used by Isaac, we consider necessary to contextualize it within the theological landscape of his time. As André de Halleux puts it, the end of the 6th century and the 7th century is characterized by a complexity of dogmatic controversies and conflicts of authority that shaped a specific mystical itinerary¹⁵².

In my opinion, there are three important elements during this period. First of all it is about the School of Nisibis, or the “School of the Persians”, which used to be the most representative educational institution for the East Syriac community. It was at the same time the place where the Theodorian orthodoxy was taught. The second place is occupied by the category of monks, represented by the Great Monastery of Mar Abraham, from Mount Izla. It was the forum of orthodoxy when the School of Nisibis was to leave the traditional teaching of the East Syriac theology. And thirdly, the institutional Church who enjoyed for a long time

¹⁴⁸ Specific to the macarian homilies and, consequently, to some parts of Syriac theology (See C. Stewart, “*Working the Earth of the Heart*”. *The Messalian Controversy on History, Texts and Language to AD 431*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1991, p. 169-203).

¹⁴⁹ ܡܠܝܬܐ ; The theme of “mingling” of God with creation is characteristic also to Ephrem referring at Incarnation and Eucharist. For the history of the term at different Patristic authors see Columba Stewart, “*Working the Earth of the Heart*”, p. 169-203.

¹⁵⁰ ܡܠܝܬܐ ܡܠܝܬܐ ܥܠ ܕܡܡܐ ܡܠܝܬܐ ܡܠܝܬܐ ܡܠܝܬܐ ; II, 5,18.

¹⁵¹ II, 7,3.

¹⁵² Cf. A. de Halleux, “La christologie de Martyrios-Sahdona dans l’évolution du nestorianisme”, *Orientalia Christiana Periodica*, 23 (1957), p. 5-32 (here 5).

good and strong relations with the School of Nisibis, as well as with the Great Monastery. In fact, a great part of the clergymen and abbots was formed of alumni of this great institution. More, one can say that, ideally and programmatically, they worked together in an integrative way¹⁵³.

Nonetheless, the three institutions did not cooperate this way permanently. We refer here to the historical period that integrates the life of Isaac of Niniveh, a time of political and theological turbulences, and yet a time of flourishing of spiritual literature. What we are interested in here are more the theological conflicts generated around Christology, in strict connection with the life of the mystics, in particular that of Isaac of Niniveh.

First of all, one can easily state that the strict dyophysism that characterized the East Syriac Christology of his time did not reflect the perspective of the whole Church community. This can be observed by looking at some important representatives like Henana, director of Nisibis School (end of 6th century), or Sahdona, Bishop of Mahoze d' Arewan (first half of the 7th century). It is not superfluous to dwell a bitt on both of them, because, as we will see, they might have had a(n) (in)direct connection with Isaac's formation.

The crisis during Henana's professoriate represented the bursting out of an already existing conflict. It is not easy to determine his theological position with a degree of certainty, because we possess only few fragments of his works and more prominent the harsh accusations of his opponent, Babai the Great. In the eyes of the conservative, his teaching seemed to propose some innovative lines in matters of doctrine and liturgy, especially regarding Theodore of Mopsuestia. Besides refusing to narrow his teaching in Theodore's works, by using some Alexandrine authors while reading the Bible, he was supposed to have been taught "a composite hypostasis" in Christ¹⁵⁴. In matter of exegetical methodology he opts for John Chrysostom, an important representative of Antiochene School, considered to have a middle position between Antiochene and Alexandrine direction¹⁵⁵.

¹⁵³ Cf. Alberto Camplani, "The Revival of Persian Monasticism (sixth to seventh century): Church Structure, Theological Academy and Reformed Monks", in *Foundations of Power and Conflict of Authority in Late-Antique Monasticism*, Leuven-Paris, 2007, p. 280.

¹⁵⁴ In Babai's words: "The Fathers of old established true doctrine, not a mixture and blending and hypostatic union, such as the opinion of Arius, Eunomius, and the impious Henana. You efface the properties (of the natures) and cause divinity to suffer by a hypostatic, composite union, and by blending and a confused mixture" (*Against One Hypostasis*, CSCO 79, p. 306). For details see L. Abramowsky and A. Goodman, *A Nestorian Collection of Christological Texts*, Cambridge II, 1972, p. XIV.

¹⁵⁵ For details see: Karl Pinggéra, "John Chrysostom in East Syrian Theology of the Late Sixth Century", in *The Harp* 18 (2005), p. 193-201.

Henana's popularity may have been due to his emphasis on the mystical union of God with human¹⁵⁶, which he demonstrated, by allegorically interpreting the Scripture, the doctrine on Christology of composite hypostasis and the Evagrian mysticism. The council of Ishoyahb I (585) witnesses about the controversy of Henana. The first canon exposes a commentary of the Creed of Nicaea in a dyophysite key, while the second gives evidence of the protection around Theodore's commentaries¹⁵⁷. Henana's concept of "composite hypostasis" does not have a long life among his disciples, but his exegetical method and, especially, his mysticism was fruitful within the next centuries. This will be the line that concerns us more in our research.

The episode denotes that important voices among the hierarchy did not in fact completely share the Theodorian orthodoxy, promoted by the metropolitan of Nisibis, Gregory of Kashkar, and the Great Monastery. It is the case of Catholikos Sabrisho¹⁵⁸ who proved to have had a moderate attitude and he did not condemn Henana in the council of 596¹⁵⁹, causing the reaction of the metropolitan and some other bishops who manifested their support. At the same time, the catholikos' wish of demoting the metropolitan failed because of the opposition of the bishops. These events provoked the departure of more than 300 students from the school in different other places¹⁶⁰, such as the School of Beth Sahde, next to Nisibis, the Great Monastery of Izla or the school of bishop Mark from Balad. Among these students there were some later great names, like Ishoyahb of Gdala and Ishoyahb of Hadyab, who were to become catholikos of the East Syriac Church. By the beginning of the 7th century three different currents developed: radical reformers (Henana and his disciples), moderate conservatives (represented by the councils of 585, 596, 605 and the major part of the East Syriac community) and radical conservatives (represented by Babai the Great, Great Monastery and Mount Izla)¹⁶¹.

¹⁵⁶ Cf. Babai the Great: "He teaches that all men participate in the nature of God, as Origen, the pagan of pagan, said, and so this wretched city is infected with this impious error". (*The Life of Mar Giwargis*, SO, p. 626.) One has to mention that Henana's spiritual position might not so much reflect a bridge towards the Chalcedonian or Monophysite Christology, but an ingénue and popular faith, against the theological elite of the time dominated occasionally by a rationalist theological direction and political preoccupations.

¹⁵⁷ SO, p. 136-139.

¹⁵⁸ Elected with the help of Kosroe II. Two important names are connected with his pro West Syriac attitude. Those would be the Christian queen Shirin and the physician Gabriel of Singar, who embraced the West Syriac confession.

¹⁵⁹ Both Sabrisho and Gregory (605) expound the traditional faith, but avoiding the problematic term "qnoma/hypostasis" and express a clear defence of Theodore's theology, by putting under blasphemy everyone who attempts at changing his doctrine (SO, p. 198).

¹⁶⁰ Cf. *Chronique de Séert*, 74, PO XIII, 4, p. 509-512.

¹⁶¹ For details see Dana Miller, "A Brief Historical and Theological Introduction to the Church of Persia to the End of the Seventh Century", in *The Ascetical Homilies of St Isaac the Syrian*, translated by the Holy Transfiguration Monastery, Boston, Massachusetts, 1984, p. 503.

The Great Monastery also represents a salient phenomenon when it comes to the East Syriac Christology of the 7th century¹⁶². An important number of the monks of Izla Mountain were well educated because of the proximity between these two institutions. Babai the Great, an alumnus of Nisibis School, who led a successful fight against Henana's theology, was the most prolific spokesman¹⁶³. His main work is entitled "The Book of Union"¹⁶⁴, a synthesis between Theodore's Christological vision and that of Nestorius ("Book of Heracleidis") and some other East Syriac authors, in particular Mar Abba. His intention was to point out a clear dyophysite reading of the Antiochene Christology¹⁶⁵, underlying the necessity of two hypostasis and refuting any mixture or hypostatic composition. So as to have a concrete existence, a nature must have a hypostasis (qnoma)¹⁶⁶. In Christ, one can speak about the divine hypostasis of the Son of God and the human hypostasis of the Man Jesus, which make the differentiation between him and other human persons. Therefore, in his opinion, speaking of one hypostasis in Christ means that a nature either is absorbed by the other, or simply disappears. A composite nature is again refuted by Babai, on the argument that both natures would be imperfect¹⁶⁷. In consequence, there is no union at the level of hypostasis, but in the person (parsopa). Christ is not simply a human united with God in grace, virtue or by anointing of the Spirit, but the Verb forms one ontological existence, one person, with the human hypostasis conceived in the womb of the Virgin. He makes the same analogy as the Alexandrine authors, when arguing that humanity and divinity are similar with the iron in the fire, not changing its properties, its nature and its hypostasis, but borrowing the attributes of divinity, like the iron takes the form of the flame and its burning action. The flame burns by itself, but the iron not. While burning, the flame cannot be broken, but the iron yes. So the

¹⁶² On the theological role of the Great Monastery see Jullien Florence, "The Great monastery at Mount Izla and the defence of the East-Syrian identity", E. Hunter (ed.), *Monasticism in Iraq*, Society of Oriental and African Studies, Londres, 2009, p. 54-63; Jullien Florence, "S'affirmer en s'opposant : les polémistes du Grand monastère (VI-VIIe siècle)", in C. Jullien (ed.), *Controverses des chrétiens dans l'Iran sassanide*, Studia Iranica. Cahier 36, Paris, 2008, p. 29-40.

¹⁶³ For the Christology of Babai see the study of G. Chediath, *The Christology of Babai the Great*, Kottayam, 1982 and L. Abramowsky, "Die Christologie Babais des Grossen", *Symposium Syriacum 1972*, OCA 197, p. 219-244.

¹⁶⁴ The complete title "On the Divinity and on the Humanity and of the Person (Parsopa) of Union" (A. Vaschalde, *Babai Magni Liber de unione*, CSCO 79-80, Louvain, 1915 – edited and Latin translation).

¹⁶⁵ For the definition of the three terms we will use a short quotation from the analysis of G. Chediath, *The Christology of Babai the Great*: "Qnoma is the concretization of the abstract kyana, as this or that. Kyana never exists except as qnoma... Qnoma may be translated as this or that *substance, substratum, subsistence, reality* opposed to the unreal, illusion. It is primarily referring to concrete reality and actuality rather than Person... Parsopa is the reality that distinguishes one qnoma from another qnoma of the same species. It is the sum total of the accidents and properties, giving the particular characteristics to the qnoma. The indivisible and singular property of the qnoma is given by the parsopa" (p. 89-90).

¹⁶⁶ *The Book of Union*, p. 306 (246).

¹⁶⁷ *The Book of Union*, p. 297 (239-240).

divinity remains untouchable, but the humanity can be destroyed¹⁶⁸. When describing the union¹⁶⁹ in Christ, he employs the attributes like prosopic¹⁷⁰, voluntary¹⁷¹, unforced¹⁷², impassible¹⁷³ ¹⁷⁴. Finally, we will give an example where Babai describes the personal union in Christ, reflecting his strict dyophysite Christology:

Perfect God in perfect Man: the Infinite dwelt¹⁷⁵ in, was united to¹⁷⁶, was clothed in¹⁷⁷, and was joint to¹⁷⁸ the finite. And although (the natures) were united, they were distinct in their properties; and although they were distinct, they were united in one parsopa¹⁷⁹. In short, the two natures¹⁸⁰ are preserved in one Christ, the Son of God¹⁸¹.

Babai's endeavour was to preserve the doctrine from the false teaching on theopaschism, which, in his opinion, was professed by Henana. His role became more important during the time the East Syriac Church was not allowed to elect a Catholikos (609-628). His radical conservative vision opposed both Henanites and Monophysites, who manifested a strong work of proselytism in the East Syriac territories, and the Chalcedonian Church of the West. The only orthodox formula that was accepted was that of Babai's. According to Thomas of Marga, he was called "Vicar"¹⁸² of the Catholikos¹⁸³, and, with archdeacon Abba, were those who substituted the see of the Church leader¹⁸⁴. During this period he received the right to inspect and change the doctrine which was not in accordance with the Theodorian faith, confirmed by the Council of Gregory (605) and later on reiterated

¹⁶⁸ *The Book of Union*, p. 304 (245).

¹⁶⁹ ܐܘܢܝܘܬܐ.

¹⁷⁰ ܐܘܢܝܘܬܐ ܕܝܚܝܬܐ.

¹⁷¹ ܐܘܢܝܘܬܐ ܕܝܚܝܬܐ.

¹⁷² ܐܘܢܝܘܬܐ ܕܝܚܝܬܐ.

¹⁷³ ܐܘܢܝܘܬܐ ܕܝܚܝܬܐ.

¹⁷⁴ *The Book of Union*, p. 163 (132).

¹⁷⁵ ܕܝܚܝܬܐ.

¹⁷⁶ ܕܝܚܝܬܐ.

¹⁷⁷ ܕܝܚܝܬܐ.

¹⁷⁸ ܕܝܚܝܬܐ.

¹⁷⁹ ܕܝܚܝܬܐ ܕܝܚܝܬܐ.

¹⁸⁰ ܕܝܚܝܬܐ.

¹⁸¹ *The Book of Union*, p. 248 (201-202).

¹⁸² ܐܘܢܝܘܬܐ.

¹⁸³ *Liber Superiorum*, ed. Paul Bedjan, Paris, 1901; *Book of Governors* ("The Historia Monastica of Thomas Bishop of Marga AD 840"), trans. by E.A. Wallis Budge, London, 1893, I.35, p. 116 (63-64).

¹⁸⁴ Alberto Camplani, interprets the historical information Thomas gives in his book I. 27, which represents an epistle addressed to Babai by three bishops from the North Mesopotamia (Cyriacus of Nisibis, Yonadhahb of Adiabene and Gabriel of Karka d'Beth Slokh), apologizing for not giving to him greater power as he would have deserved. The conclusion he draws is that Babai's authority did not go beyond the monastic space and the three dioceses mentioned above, in North Mesopotamia (Cf. Alberto Camplani, "The revival of Persian Monasticism (sixth to seventh century): Church Structure, Theological Academy and Reformed Monks", in *Foundations of Power and Conflict of Authority in Late-Antique Monasticism*, Leuven-Paris, 2007, p. 277-296 (here 288).

before the king at Mada'in (612)¹⁸⁵. Because of his intransigent position¹⁸⁶, doubled by his zeal, while being the abbot of the Great Monastery, a crisis was generated, which led to the departure of some monks. Thomas of Marga lists some names of those who left the monastery during the period of dispute: Rabban Qamisho, Mar Jacob, Rabban Afni Maran, Amma Leontius Zinaya, Rabban Joseph¹⁸⁷, then Mar Zekaisho together with Abraham of Nisibis, founding the Monastery Bet Rabban (after the death of Mar Jacob, the abbot of Bet Abe, the former one became head for both monasteries)¹⁸⁸; Rabban Jacob, the abbot of the Convent of Bet Abe¹⁸⁹. The "History of Rabban 'Edta" adds some other names of the monks who left the Great Monastery, when Babai became the successor of Dadisho, and went to Bet Abe, probably even before the arrival of Rabban Jacob: Benjamin, Peter, Arda, Ishai, Paul and John¹⁹⁰. Rabban Jacob¹⁹¹, despite his friendship with Sabrisho, professed an "orthodox" faith. At least Isho'yahb of Adiabene, his disciple, in one letter addressed to Sahdona (II.7), mentions him as a defender of the true faith: "before you, Isaiah of Tahal, a foolish and insane

¹⁸⁵ This moment is quite interesting because of the position adopted. The monastic party submitted a creed before the King, which acknowledged two natures, two substances and one person in Christ, and employed the expression "mother of Christ" instead of "theotokos". But meanwhile, they adopted a monothelite position to explain the unity in Christ. He was one in a single "person of filiation", a single power, a single will, a single economy (See SO, p. 565, 575-582, 591-592).

¹⁸⁶ There is an interesting case of opposing Babai the Great even before getting his important place in the East Syriac Church, Babai the Small (of Nisibis). The conflict was so big that the followers of Babai the Great in the Monastery did not even permit somebody to join them before anathematizing Babai of Nisibe (*Chronique de Séert II*, PO XIII, p. 553). Both of them originated in rich families and both of them were disciples of Abraham of Kashkar. The latter one left the Great Monastery and founded a monastery in the mountains of Adiabene. There he had two important companions for our discussion – Mar Isho'Zeka, who also left the Great Monastery (about his identity see the debate Paolo Bettolo, "Contrasting styles of Ecclesiastical Authority and Monastic Life in the Church of the East at the Beginning of the 7th Century", in *Foundations of Power and Conflict Authority in Late-Antique Monasticism*, Leuven-Paris, 2007, p. 297-332, here 297-305), and Mar Sabrisho, who later became catholicos (596-604), and refused to condemn Hanana, becoming the opponent of Metropolitan Gregory of Nisibis (He was also close to Queen Shirin and the doctor Gabriel of Singar, both of them with promonophysite visions). In this frame some questions may occur – why was he anathematized by his brothers of Mount Izla, is it because of his friendship with Sabrisho, who manifested a moderate position and attitude in the debate around Henana's teaching? Or it is maybe around an agreement with Sabrisho to restore the Messalian monastic communities to the Great Monastery? (See the notes on Babai of A. Guillaumont in "Le témoignage de Babai le Grand sur le mesaliens", in *Symposium Syriacum 1976*, OCA 275, Roma 1978, p. 257-265) Paolo Bettolo argues that "nothing certain can be said about these connections, but is not unreasonable to suggest some elements that may justify these fractures otherwise inexplicable within the difficult situation in Nisibis and the Great Monastery during the first years of the seventh century" (*Contrasting styles of Ecclesiastical Authority*, p. 305).

¹⁸⁷ *Book of Governors*, II. 33, p. 113 (246-247).

¹⁸⁸ *History of Rabban Mar Abraham, head of the Monastery of Rabban Zekaišo and the Monastery of 'Bet Abe*, quoted in *Book of Governors*, I.14, p. 67 (37)

¹⁸⁹ *Book of Governors*, I.13, p. 62 (35). It seems that he befriended Sabrisho, the future Catholicos of the East Syriac Church, who was first bishop of Lashom, the native city of Jacob (cf. Fiey, *Assyrie chétienne III*, Beyrouth, 1968, n. 8, p. 56-57), and later too, Sabrisho spent five years as hermit, between the seventh and the eighth decades of the 6th century, in Sa'ran, and so one can guess at the familiarity of the two (Fiey, *Assyrie chétienne III*, p. 75).

¹⁹⁰ *Book of Governors*, I.13, p. 66 (37) quoting *The History of Rabban 'Edta*, p. 155 (233). For details see Paolo Bettolo, *Contrasting styles of Ecclesiastical Authority*, p. 316.

¹⁹¹ On Jacob's departure from the Great Monastery see *Book of Governors* I.13, p. 61-63 (34).

(man) wrote the same things, in the same way, with the same objects and with the same terms, and just as previously were confuted with a book by the man of God and a spiritual athlete, the holy and zealous Mar Henanisho, then they were confuted loudly by the divine charity and the source of humility of our father Mar Jacob...»¹⁹².

Consequently, another important topos for our debate is the Convent of Bet Abe itself, the place where the great theologian Sahdona was spiritually formed, contemporary and friend with Isho'yahb III, the future catholicos. Besides Isho'yahb there was also the monastery of Catholicos George, who ordained Isaac of Niniveh, and the place where Isaac himself spent some time, after being brought by Catholicos George to the North Mesopotamia from his native land, Bet Qatraye, and where he was ordained bishop of Niniveh. Around the monastery there were some suspicions regarding the theological direction professed and, consequently, the type of mystical perspective that was theologised there. In this frame, it is worth mentioning the visit Babai the Great made in the monastery, trying to make some changes in its liturgical order, an action which did not succeed¹⁹³. Thomas' report about this event might give an idea about the balance of power in the Church of that time as well as the status of semi-autonomy some of the monasteries had.

It is worth dwelling now on the personality of Sahdona and his Christological vision. From the historical sources, one can learn that, after finishing his studies, he entered the Monastery of Bet Abe, around 620, under Rabban Jacob, who came from the Great Monastery, and was contemporary with Ishoyahb III¹⁹⁴. At the suggestion of the latter, he was elected bishop of Mahoze d'Arewan. There are different pieces of information about the Christological perspective he professed. From the letters of Ishoyahb III and the "Chronicle of Séert", one can learn that Sahdona professed a Christology different from that of his religious community and, in particular, he is considered to be among the last disciples of Henana,

¹⁹² R. Duval (ed.), Ish'yahb Patriarchae, *Liber Epistularum III*, CSCO 11-12, Louvani, 1962, p. 133 (100).

¹⁹³ Thomas of Marga mentions Babai's visit to the Monastery Bet Abe, enquiring so that to observe the orthodoxy of the faith. He wished to make same changes in matter of liturgical order, but because of a miracle happened there, which demonstrated the correctness of the liturgy, was not able to fulfil his will (*Book of Governors*, p. 54-55 (97)).

¹⁹⁴ From the *Book of Governors* one can learn that Isho'yahb II, accompanied by some important ecclesiastics, among them Isho'yahb of Niniveh and Sahdona, p. 125-126 (70), journeyed to Aleppo where he met emperor Heraklios. The Catholicos and the emperor also brought their discussion around some faith issues and the former demonstrated to the latter that the Church of Persia follows the faith of the Nicene Fathers and is not heretical. The agreement was not complete, as the Persian did not want to remember in their liturgy Cyril of Alexandria, while the emperor the three Antiochian doctors – Diodor of Tarsus, Theodore of Mopsuestia and Nestorius. These names were simply omitted so as to overcome the situation. The catholicos celebrated a liturgy and the emperor received the communion. Upon his return, Isho'yahb was hardly criticized by the representatives of the radical party (See also the *Chronique de Séert*, p. 558-559).

during his studies at Nisibis, together with Isaiah of Tahal and Meskena Arbaya¹⁹⁵. Ishoyahb III also mentions some partisans of Sahdona at Nisibis and surroundings – Metropolitan Kyriakos, and the teachers Guria and Meskena Arbaya. Adam Becker, a supporter of this theory, advocates the idea that, despite the fact he did not really know Henana, he would have been influenced by his theological vision¹⁹⁶. His argumentation is based on the similitudes of language. Interpreting the information Thomas of Marga¹⁹⁷ gives us in reference to Sahdona, one can argue he was converted by the Jacobites to the Monophysite doctrine during his visit to Apamea to a Monophysite convent and, while trying to convert its monastics, was himself converted to their faith. Isho'dnah of Basra speaks about a visit to Edessa where he would have changed his name in Martyrios and, after his expulsion, the same city would have been his refuge. In addition he evokes a possible bishopric ministry conferred by Heraclius¹⁹⁸. Both Thomas of Marga and Isho'denah of Basra establish a connection between the two authors, emperor Heraclius and the Chalcedonian theology, an idea embraced by Duval, Wright¹⁹⁹ and, in contemporary times, by Brock²⁰⁰ and Manel Nin²⁰¹, and yet within the frame of the East Syriac theology.

Ovidiu Ioan, a contemporary scholar, who concentrated his research mostly on Ishoyahb III, dedicated a study to Sahdona²⁰². In this article, after listing all the opinions already mentioned in our research, a different perspective is proposed. It is difficult to identify Henana's influence on Sahdona's theology, as the latter one did not use the problematic expression "hypostasis synthetos" – composite hypostasis, employed by the former. He traces the origin of his Christology in the "Book of Heracleidis"²⁰³, with its two interpolations

¹⁹⁵ *Chronique de Séert*, p. 315 (635); *Liber Epistularum*, p. 139-141 (104-105).

¹⁹⁶ Adam H. Becker, *Fear of God and the Beginning of Wisdom, The School of Nisibis and Christian Scholastic Culture in Late-Antique Mesopotamia*, Philadelphia, 2006, p. 200.

¹⁹⁷ *Book of Governors*, Introduction, p. XXXIX, LXXXVII.

¹⁹⁸ *Livre de la chasteté composé par Jéudenah, évêque de Basrah*, p. 67-68/ 56-57.

¹⁹⁹ Ruben Duval, *La littérature syriaque: des origines jusqu'à la fin de cette littérature après la conquête par les Arabes aux XIIIe siècle, étude historique des différents genres de la littérature religieuse et ecclésiastique, l'historiographie, la philosophie, la philologie, les sciences et les traductions, suivie de notices biographiques sur les écrivains avec un index bibliographique et général*, Paris, 1907, p. 150 ; William Wright, *A Short History of Syriac Literature*, London, 1894, p. 171, n. 1. He also opposes Assemani who argues that he embraced, in fact, the Catholic faith – "ab erroribus Nestorianis ad Catholicam veritatem".

²⁰⁰ Sebastian Brock, *A Brief Outline of Syriac Literature*, Kottayam, Moran 'Eth'o 9, p. 50-51.

²⁰¹ "Martyrios/ Sahdona. Alcuni aspetti del suo insegnamento cristologico", in *La grande stagione della mistica siriano-orientale (VI-VIII secolo)*, Centro Ambrosiano, 2009, p. 29-70 (here 31-31).

²⁰² "Martyrios/ Sahdona: La pensée christologique, clé de la Théologie mystique", in *Les mystiques syriaques*. ed. by Desreumaux, Alain. Études syriaques 8. Paris, Geuthner, 2011, p. 41-56.

²⁰³ Translated into Syriac by Mar Aba (540). The introduction had probably been done by a constantinopolitan theologian, so that to protect the Christology of Nestorius by doing a new interpretation. The lack of the term "hypostasis" is strictly connected to Theodore's disciples or more to the theology of Nisibis, as Abramowski suggests, while the intensive use of "person" is a distinctive mark of Pseudo-Nestorius (See Ovidiu Ioan, *Martyrios/ Sahdona: La pensée christologique*, note 30, p. 50-51).

identified by Luise Abramowski, “unique hypostase”²⁰⁴, before “one person”²⁰⁵ and the two adjectives attached to the term “person” – ܥܠܡܐ and ܥܡܝܢܐ²⁰⁶. In fact, in his opinion, these two interpolations are the very core of his doctrine. According to Abramowski, using this book, authoritative for the East Syriac theology, Sahdona wanted to justify his vision. It is important to underline that his Christology, by the language he uses, does not betray any non-Persian elements, except the use of “one hypostasis”. We will now refer to an important paragraph that reveals Sahdona’s visions:

When God the Word in a sublime manner became one with this particular nature of our humility, from the very beginning of its formation, and forevermore he made it one hypostasis²⁰⁷ and one person²⁰⁸ with Himself, by a wondrous and ineffable union and filled it with the glory of his divinity. And in its form he was seen by creation: ‘They beheld!’ it says, ‘His glory, the glory of the Only-Begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth’ (John 1:14)²⁰⁹.

According to his perspective, the two natures are united in Christ in one hypostasis and one person. Using the same East Syriac phraseology, Sahdona affirms that the Son of God clothed²¹⁰ a human body and transmitted the glory of his hypostasis to what was visible²¹¹ and it has been seen in the world with its own aspect²¹². And the consequence – the unique hypostasis²¹³ and person²¹⁴ of the Son is the unique one who assumes (ܥܠܡܐ ܕܥܡܝܢܐ) and is assumed²¹⁵. One can intuit that in Sahdona’s case, the term hypostasis changes its sense – it does not describe the individuality of natures, but their union in one person. The person belongs to the unique hypostasis and it is the visible sign of the real union of the natures in one hypostasis²¹⁶.

²⁰⁴ ܥܠܡܐ ܥܡܝܢܐ.

²⁰⁵ ܥܠܡܐ ܥܡܝܢܐ.

²⁰⁶ Luis Abramowski, “Maryrius/Sahdona and Dissent in the Church of the East”, in C. Jullien (ed.), *Chrétiens en terre d’Iran. II, Controverses des chrétiens dans l’Iran sassanide*, Paris (Cahiers de Studia Iranica 36), p. 13-28 (here 20-21).

²⁰⁷ ܥܠܡܐ ܥܡܝܢܐ.

²⁰⁸ ܥܠܡܐ ܥܡܝܢܐ.

²⁰⁹ A. de Halleux (ed.), Martyrius (Sahdona), *Œuvres spirituelles II, Livre de la perfection*, CSCO 214-215, 2,21.

²¹⁰ ܐܝܬܐ.

²¹¹ ܥܠܡܐ ܥܡܝܢܐ.

²¹² ܥܠܡܐ ܥܡܝܢܐ.

²¹³ ܥܠܡܐ ܥܡܝܢܐ.

²¹⁴ ܥܠܡܐ ܥܡܝܢܐ.

²¹⁵ ܥܠܡܐ ܥܡܝܢܐ ; *Livre de la perfection*, 2,22.

²¹⁶ Cf. Ovidiu Ioan, *Martyrius/ Sahdona: La pensée christologique*, p. 55.

His colleague in the Monastery of Bet Abe, the future catholicos Isho'yahb III²¹⁷, who supported him to become bishop of Mahoze d'Arewan, later on manifested his opposition towards his Christological terminology, especially regarding the term “hypostasis”. From his letters, one can learn that the sense Sahdona gives to “hypostasis” is closer to “person” than to “nature”, as professed by the East Syriac Christology²¹⁸. In this frame the originality of the author may be discussed by using the Pseudo Nestorian expression: Christ is revealed in one “hypostatic person”²¹⁹ of the natures which is not borrowed or adopted, that would imply a separation of the owner. And more, Sahdona attacks the unique “ousia” of the divine and human nature of the monophysites²²⁰, while considering “ousia” synonym with “kyana”. He does not use “hypostasis” for “person”, but gives a new sense for the former one. Ovidiu Ioan shows that Sahdona's main reason of doing a new reading of the Christology of his Church is to create the necessary frame for the doctrine of deification. His main interest is that of building a mystical theology based on a Christological formulation that is able to describe the complexity of union and, in consequence, presupposes the “communicatio idiomatum”. In his words, this doctrine can be expressed in few points:

- Every nature participates in the properties of the other, without losing its own properties and without transforming itself;
- In consequence – God the Word accepted the union to be called what is human by nature, and permitted the human to be called what is God by nature: God the Word – the son of man, because of the humanity he assumed; and the son of man, this assumed nature, to be called the son of God;

²¹⁷ For details on his theological perspective and the historical context see: Jullien Florence, “Le charisme au service de la hiérarchie: les moines et le Catholicos Išō'yahb III. Regard sur la crise sécessionniste du Fārs au VIIe siècle”, in D. Aigle (ed.), *Au fondement de l'autorité religieuse. Approches comparatives*, Miroir de l'Orient musulman, Turnhout, 2011, p. 33-44; John Healey, “The Patriarch Išō'yahb and the Christians of Qatar in the First Islamic Century”, in E. Hunter (ed.), *The Christian Heritage of Iraq: Collected Papers from the Christianity of Iraq I-V Seminar Days*, Gorgias Eastern Christian Studies 13, Piscataway, NJ, Gorgias Press, 2009, p. 1-9; Martin Tamcke, “The Catholicos Ischo'jahb III and Giwargis and the Arabs”, in Ray Jabre Mouawad, *Les Syriacques transmetteurs de civilisations. L'expérience du Bilād el-Shām à l'époque omeyyade*, Patrimoine Syriaque, Actes du Colloque IX. Antélias, Liban: Centre d'Études et de Recherches Orientales, Paris: L'Harmattan, 2005, p. 199-210; Richard E. Payne, “Persecuting Heresy in Early Islamic Iraq: The Catholicos Ishoyahb III and the Elites of Nisibis”, in Andrew Cain and Noel Emmanuel Lenski (eds.), *The Power of Religion in Late Antiquity: Selected Papers from the Seventh Biennial Shifting Frontiers in Late Antiquity Conference*, Farnham: Ashgate, 2009, p. 397-409; Paolo Bettio, “Un vescovo in un'età di torbidi: Išō'yahb III e la Chiesa Siro-orientale nel VII secolo”, in E. Vergani and S. Chialà (eds.), *La grande stagione della mistica siro-orientale (VI-VIII secolo). Atti del 5° Incontro sull'Oriente cristiano di tradizione siriana*, Milano, Biblioteca ambrosiana, 26 maggio 2006, Ecumenismo e dialogo. Milano: Centro Ambrosiano, 2010, p. 71-90.

²¹⁸ *Liber Epistularum*, p. 134 (101).

²¹⁹ ܚܕܐ ܚܕܐ ܡܢ ܚܕܐ.

²²⁰ *Livre de la perfection* 2,28.

- The one who descended is the same with the one who ascended, by the means of his manifestation and dwelling on earth; the one who is in heaven is the same with the one on earth, because of the honour and glorification;
- Finally, the unique person of Christ is the same Son of God and Son of man, the nature of God and of human remaining perfectly in this unique person of Christ, which exists, in the union, with all their properties, without separation or confusion since annunciation and up to eternity²²¹.

Isho'yahb, a radical conservator, reacted against Sahdona's teaching on one hypostasis. He even wanted to dismiss him from the bishopric, but, it seems that he had important sympathizers among the moderates, like Catholikos Maremmeh²²². Finally, Isho'yahb triumphed when he became catholikos (648-659), and Sahdona was exiled in the neighbourhood of Edessa.

One last element regarding Sahdona refers to the main reason of expressing a bold Christology in a context that was not really friendly to this kind of initiatives. As we have seen, it is unlikely that this had happened because of his presupposed conversion to the Monophysite or Chalcedonian doctrine, as he maintains throughout his work the East Syriac language on matter of Christology (the only aspect he changes is the use of the term "qnoma"), but more because of his endeavour to express a mystical theology, as an expression of his experience. And the possibility of achieving perfection in "theosis" is found only in a real "communicatio idiomatum"²²³. We will give one last example that will be very useful for our endeavour of placing the mystical theology of Isaac of Niniveh in the frame of the East Syriac Christology of his time. Sahdona speaks about the human, who may become God's dwelling by the means of love²²⁴, or about the "mingling" of human with God in the will²²⁵, typical for the traditional teaching of his community and, more, about the possibility of seeing God in the spirit²²⁶. This last theme will be a controversial point in the history of the theological thinking of Isaac's time, and at the same time, in consequence, a salient point for the analysis to follow. So, Sahdona is not really an innovator, but more an interpreter of his own tradition.

As one could intuit, around Bet Abe, by the second decade of the seventh century, there were some internal problems, generated by different theological perspectives, doubled by a

²²¹ *Livre de la perfection*, 2,25 ; the last paragraph comes close to the Chalcedonian definition.

²²² Cf. J. M. Fiey, "Isho'yaw le Grand", *OCP* 36 (1970), p. 25.

²²³ Cf. Ovidiu Ioan, *Martyrius/ Sahdona: La pensée christologique*, p. 58.

²²⁴ *Œuvres spirituelles*, 4,3; 4,7

²²⁵ *Œuvres spirituelles II*, 4,3.

²²⁶ *Œuvres spirituelles II*, 8,5.

suspicion around the mystical life, as a consequence of the professed Christology and the fear of Messalianism. To support this thesis we will picture three situations and some characters whose names are directly connected with this convent. From the “Book of Governors”²²⁷ we learn that after Rabban Jacob’s death, two monks Abraham of Kashkar and Mar Isho’zeka left the monastery. Contemporary with Isho’yahb III (and consequently with Sahdona), they went to Dassen and founded a monastery there. After a short episcopate, Abraham came back to Bet Abe and became its leader. There are no clear connections between their departure and the Christological dispute, but, at least, one may presume some, by taking into consideration the timing and geography of this event.

Another similar case refers to Jacob of Nuhadra, who was monk in Bet Abe Monastery while Qamisho was hegumenos. Thomas of Marga describes him as “a spiritual man and doctor” and adds “he shone his ascetism more than all his contemporaries and he was clairvoyant and saw the future and was called by his contemporaries Mar Jacob the Seer”. We find there another interesting detail, namely that he departed “secretly” from the monastery because of the jealousy²²⁸ and the foolish zeal of some brothers. The authors compare this situation with that of Rabban Jacob, who had to leave the Great Monastery and come to Bet Abe²²⁹. This must have occurred around 680-681.

A much more interesting case, presented by the same author in the next chapter, is Rabban ‘Afni Maran, a disciple of Rabban Qamisho, such as Jacob the Seer. Thomas describes him as gifted by God with “wisdom and understanding of the Scriptures”. Therefore, he was called “spiritual philosopher”. Nevertheless, as in the case of Jacob, because he was “like a pillar of light which led the Hebrews and because God wished him to be founder (planter), as well as his spiritual father, of a monastery with a large brotherhood, *envious* people stirred up against him and placed him on a bier of the dead, and ascribing him the name of Messalian to him they brought out with the psalms and prayers for the dead to the place where they keep the asses. Nevertheless, by his hands also the Lord built and finished the monastery which is to this day called by his name and is his memorial”²³⁰. One can observe that, as in the case of Jacob the Seer, or Isaac of Niniveh, the author interprets this event within God’s providence, while expressing an immediate reason – the envy of a group –

²²⁷ I, 23, p. 46-47 (79-82).

²²⁸ The same expression when describing the retire of Isaac from the see of Niniveh. Later on we will point to an interesting connection between Jacob the Seer and the great John of Dalyatha.

²²⁹ *Book of Governors*, II, 2, p. 119-120 (66).

²³⁰ *Book of Governors*, II, 2, p. 121-123 (68-69).

and under this mask, some typical accusations occur for that very times, Christological and Messalian issues²³¹.

A last example concerning this topic is the Christological letter of Catholicos George, the Patriarch who ordained Isaac bishop of Niniveh, addressed to the chorebishop Mina from Bet Persaye region²³². At a simple reading, one can observe that George professed a balanced diophysite Christology and yet with a clear highlight against the Monophysites. From the very beginning, in the title he stresses that the Verb “was not made flesh in his person”²³³ in the sense of transformation, as some of the contemporary heretics used to say (Monophysites).

There are some Christological expressions specific to the Church tradition he belonged to – in Jesus-Christ “dwells”²³⁴ his divinity and in this he fulfils the renewal of the world; he clearly speaks about the eternity of Christ’s divinity and the beginning of his humanity by the means of human’s participation in Incarnation. Christ is “one Son of God in his divinity and his humanity” in “two natures”²³⁵, as humanity was anointed by the Spirit. He is man and God in the same time through the Verb of God who got united with humanity in “one indissoluble union”²³⁶ that became “his dwelling place”²³⁷ for eternity. At this point he mentions as sources Theodore and Nestorius, advocating that they were unjustly calumniated, as their teaching is in accordance with the tradition of the Church. George associates the humiliation to Christ’s humanity and the glorious works to his divinity and yet he clearly speaks about the union of the two natures²³⁸ in “one filiation”²³⁹.

Further, he argues that divinity manifests itself only through humanity, from the very beginning created as image of God and the connection with the whole creation²⁴⁰. Jesus Christ suffered and died as human, not as God (against *Theopasism*)²⁴¹. And consequently come two points of accusations against Monophysites: in the divinity there is no changing, variation, limit, composition, passion and, secondly, the humanity did not disappear by absorption in the divinity because of its glory and infinity. The definition he gives as a response to these accusations shows again he is faithful to his own tradition, considered to be in accordance

²³¹ These two aspects will be enlightened more when dealing with the so called “the process of the mystics”, and there we will also point to the connection between Rabban ‘Afni Maran and John of Dalyatha.

²³² Cf. J. B. Chabot (ed.), *Synodicon Orientale/ SO*, 1902, p. 215-226 (490-514).

²³³ ܡܬܠܡܕܐ ܕܝܗܘܐ ܕܥܡܐ ܕܡܝܬܐ (SO, 227/ 490).

²³⁴ ܕܡܝܬܐ ܕܝܗܘܐ (SO, 232/ 496).

²³⁵ ܕܝܗܘܐ ܕܡܝܬܐ.

²³⁶ ܕܡܝܬܐ ܕܡܝܬܐ.

²³⁷ ܕܡܝܬܐ.

²³⁸ ܕܡܝܬܐ ܕܡܝܬܐ ܕܡܝܬܐ.

²³⁹ ܕܡܝܬܐ ܕܡܝܬܐ (SO 236/ 502).

²⁴⁰ SO 227/ 503

²⁴¹ SO, 241/ 508.

with that of the Apostles: “Christ, our Lord, in his bodily manifestation is a veritable man²⁴²... Veritable God²⁴³ dwells²⁴⁴ in him and in him unifies his humanity with his divinity in one inseparable union²⁴⁵... One Christ and one Son of God in two natures²⁴⁶... One Son in his divinity and humanity”²⁴⁷. Speaking about the unity of natures he highlights the uniqueness of the person: “His humanit, formed in the womb of the Virgin, is inseparably united with his divinity, in one prosopon/ πρόσωπον of filiation”²⁴⁸.

The manifestation in the body of his humanity represents God’s most glorius revelation in the world. He took the “human garment”²⁴⁹ so that to hide the splendour of his eternal divinity. And yet, he is recognised as one Son in his divinity and humanity in the same time.

The practical conquence of his Christology is the possibility for achieving divine filiation by the divine grace. He describes this process similarly with what occurred in Christ’s person: “our nature does not simplify itself and does not change itself in the nature of divinity by the fact we are called sons of God and we are to inherit his imperishable and imuable glory in the eternal life, but dwells in its limits. Similarly as the Verb has not been changed in his nature for he was made flesh”²⁵⁰.

Finally, he establishes the orthodoxy of his teaching making appeal to the great Fathers of the Eastern as well as Western Church: St Ignatius of Antioch²⁵¹, St Athanasius of Alexandria²⁵², Ambrosius of Milan²⁵³, Gregory of Nazianzus²⁵⁴; Amphilochius of Iconium²⁵⁵,

²⁴² ܠܝܚܝܬ ܕܡܝܬܐ.

²⁴³ ܠܝܚܝܬ ܕܡܠܟܐ.

²⁴⁴ ܡܬ ܕܡܝܬܐ.

²⁴⁵ ܕܝܚܝܬ ܕܡܝܬܐ ܕܡܠܟܐ.

²⁴⁶ ܡܬܝܬܐ ܕܡܠܟܐ.

²⁴⁷ SO 238/ 504.

²⁴⁸ ܠܝܚܝܬ ܕܡܝܬܐ ܕܡܠܟܐ; SO 242/ 509.

²⁴⁹ ܠܝܚܝܬ ܕܡܠܟܐ; SO 241/ 508.

²⁵⁰ SO 240/ 507.

²⁵¹ He speaks about the duality of Christ’s nature: “Letter to Smyrnaeans”, William Cureton (ed.), *Corpus Ignatianum*, Berlin, 1849, p. 103, 105.

²⁵² Two natures of Christ, one eternal of the Verb and the other that took its beginning in the incarnation: “Epistola ad Adelphium”, PG XXVI, col. 1076 (*Sancti Patri Nostri Athanasii, Archiepiscopi Alexandrini. Opera omnia quae exstant vel quae eius nomine circumferuntur, Patrologiae cursus completa*, ed by J. P. Migne, serie graecae (PG) 25, 26 et 27, Paris 1884 et 1887).

²⁵³ In the line of Paul (Hebrews 11: 11) and Peter (Matthew 16: 16) he argues that Christ is truly God, without beginning as the Father, who took from the Virgin a body and a reasonable soul through the work of the Spirit: “De fide ad Gratianum Augustum libri quinque”, PL XVI, 527-698, here col. 883; “Oratio XLIV”, PG XXXVI, col. 608.

²⁵⁴ Quoted while speaking about the invisible God and visible God, his temple: “Epistola ad Cledonium”, PG XXXVII, col. 180.

²⁵⁵ He associates the humiliation to humanity and the glorious works to the divinity, for Jesus Christ is “in two natures, the Son of the Holy God” (ܠܝܚܝܬ ܕܡܠܟܐ ܡܝܬ ܕܡܠܟܐ ܕܡܠܟܐ ܕܡܠܟܐ ܕܡܠܟܐ): “Letter on Faith”, PG XXXIX, col. 98.

between ascetical mystics and ecstatic mystics. If the former is characterised by fear and mortification, the latter one is built much more on freedom and love and professes a harsh attitude regarding the polemic books and, in consequence, vis-à-vis intransigent theological positions²⁶².

2.3 The process of the mystics (787-790)

In the third part of this chapter we will be dealing with the so called “process of mystics” ruled by Catholikos Timothy I, colligated to three great mystics, two of them “followers” of Isaac of Niniveh, John of Dalyatha and Joseph Hazzaya, and the third one, the great John the Solitary, the “father” of the East Syriac spiritual tradition. This analysis will bring new interesting information about the Christological context and the mystical problematic issues of Isaac’s time.

One can observe that the method employed in our research focuses on the analysis of some episodes or characters with a tangential contact to Isaac’s theology, which, correlated to the short biographies and lapidary information around his personality that we have so far, evoked in the previous chapters, might help us to historically picture his theological and mystical background. Despite the fact that this event occurred, probably, more than 50 years after Isaac’s passing away, it reveals important aspects regarding the way this important family of mystics received and integrated the East Syriac Christology in their own mystical vision²⁶³.

From the very beginning of the analysis we can state that this event represents “an exemplary and systemic conflict between an institutional theology, expression of a scholastic world and a spiritual theology, elaborated by a savant monasticism”²⁶⁴. The problems discussed at the council touch on the anthropological questions regarding Christ’s nature and, consequently, the divinization of human. The answers to those fundamental aspects will have a great importance

²⁶² Paolo Bettolo, *Congetture intorno a un’assenza*, p. 157-158.

²⁶³ I will use for this section mostly five representative works – the monograph dedicated by Robert Beulay to the East Syriac mystics (*La lumière sans forme. Introduction à l’étude de la mystique chrétienne syro-orientale*, Chevtogne, 1987) and a second dedicated to John of Dalyatha (*L’enseignement spirituel de Jean de Dalyatha, mystique syro-oriental du VIII siècle*, Théologie historique 83, Beauchesne, Paris, 1990), two articles signed Vittorio Berti, dedicated to the condemnation of the mystics by Timothy (“Le débat sur la vision de Dieu et la condamnation des mystiques par Timothée I^{er}: la perspective du patriarche”, in *Études Syriaque* 8, *Les mystiques syriaques*, p. 151-176) and the second one to the biographer of Joseph Hazzaya, Nestorius of Nuhadra (“Grazia, visione e natura in Nestorio di Nuhadra, solitario e vescovo siro-orientale”, in *Annali di Scienze Religiose* 10 (2005), p. 219-357) and the monograph on Timothy I (Vittorio Berti, *Vita e studi di Timoteo I, Patriarca Cristiano di Baghdad*, Studia Iranica, Cahier 41, Paris 2009).

²⁶⁴ Cf. Vittorio Berti, *Grazia, visione e natura in Nestorio di Nuhadra*, p. 151.

for the legitimization of a mystical theology, an experience of union, and, finally, a divine knowledge, in strict connection with the Christological definition.

Before entering the discussion, we find useful to dwell on the connection between Isaac and the authors condemned in the council. In a chronological order, we have already dealt with the first one, John the Solitary, “the father” of the East Syriac spirituality. As I have already mentioned, he is an enigmatic person. His timing was dated from the fifth to eighth century, and his theological world from Gnosticism to Messalianism. However, the idea quite generally accepted by the scholars is that he lived at the beginning of the fifth century and is different from his homonym who was contemporary with the Origenist dispute. Regarding Isaac, we remember that John the Solitary is one of his essential mentors in matter of spirituality.

As we will see later on, in the documents around the council in discussion, there is no direct charge against him. Yet something can be hypothesised. André de Halleux, in his article dedicated to John’s Christology²⁶⁵, questions some polemic aspects from his writings. First of all, he identifies the problematic expression “one qnoma²⁶⁶ of the Son of God”²⁶⁷, and yet not describing the divine nature in a Monophysite sense, but as a result of union, that would apparently give space to a Chalcedonian interpretation²⁶⁸. One can find the same expression in John’s third memra addressed to Thomasios – “one qnoma of Christ” and “one qnoma of the One Son of God”²⁶⁹. The Belgian scholar develops his argumentation showing that when speaking about “one qnoma”, John’s main interest is not to frame a Christological discourse, but to picture some different forms that describe the dynamics of the process of revelation within Christ’s Economy. The term does not refer to the Greek “hypostasis”, but to the doxological and biblical title of the One Son of God Incarnated, so, consequently, it cannot be read neither in a Monophysite sense, nor Chalcedonian. It is more about a form of archaic Christology²⁷⁰.

There is a second problematic issue revealed by the same author. When speaking about incarnation he is tributary to the Syriac ancient phraseology²⁷¹. At the same time he stresses the unity between the natures, speaking about “the veritable and indivisible communion” or “the glorious association”²⁷² between the humanity and the divinity of Christ. The natural consequence is the incorruptibility of Christ’s body and successively, of the nature of humans in the new life.

²⁶⁵ A. de Halleux, “La Christologie de Jean le Solitaire”, in *Le Muséon*, 94 (1981), 1-2, p. 5-36.

²⁶⁶ ܩܢܡܐ.

²⁶⁷ L. G. Rignell, *Briefe von Johannes dem Einsiedler mit kritischen Apparat, Einleitung und Übersetzung*, Lund, 1941, p. 96, 10.

²⁶⁸ The author argues this expression is an interpolation of the copyist.

²⁶⁹ W. Strothman, *Johannes von Apamea*, *Patristische Texte und Studien*, Berlin, 1972, p. 215, 241.

²⁷⁰ A. de Halleux, *La Christologie de Jean le Solitaire*, p. 11.

²⁷¹ ܩܝܡܐ ܕܡܝܬܐ, or ܩܝܡܐ ܕܡܝܬܐ ; L. G. Rignell, *Briefe von Johannes dem Einsiedler*, p. 94.

²⁷² L. G. Rignell, *Briefe von Johannes dem Einsiedler*, p. 95.

This is the principle of deification²⁷³. Consequently, when speaking about Christ's human nature, he makes a difference between ܠܚܡܐ, because of its external, material connotation, and ܠܢܦܫܐ, for its spiritual subtlety. The “gushma” of Resurrected Christ is only an appearance and the spiritual nature of his “pagra” is invisible²⁷⁴. This idea would support a spiritualist interpretation of Christ's resurrection, and, in consequence, a transformation of Christ's body. In fact, this issue is directly connected to the problematic themes around Patriarch Timothy's council.

In the same line, Brouria Bitton Ashkelony, in her article dedicated to John's vision of prayer²⁷⁵, touches the idea of spiritualisation, by analysing John's theory of prayer. In short, spiritual prayer is generated by God Himself, who is spirit, not by learning or experience, and does not consist of words²⁷⁶. The one who attains this state, beyond words and sounds, resembles and joins the angelic powers, who glorify God in silence who Himself is Silence²⁷⁷. There is a hierarchy generated by the three spiritual stages: voice, corresponding to bodily conduct, word to psychical conduct and silence to spiritual conduct, and, in consequence, the first two material types of prayer pertain to what he calls the state of the right people and only the last one to the perfect people (spiritual)²⁷⁸. In this frame, it is worth mentioning that the idea of “God is silence” in John of Apamea describes his vision on Incarnation as reflected in his letter to Eutropius and Eusebius, introduced as “On the man of voice and word”²⁷⁹, valuing the perspective of Ignatius of Antioch. In this letter, John assimilates the voice to the body and living in the world, while the silence to the spirit, in the new world. Refining this idea, he applies it to the unity in Christ – more excellent than the mingling²⁸⁰ of the word in the voice, is the mixture²⁸¹ of God-Logos ended in the body²⁸². As the word and the voice create one unity, one intellection²⁸³, one understanding²⁸⁴, it is the same for the Son of God – one impression²⁸⁵ perceived in two powers²⁸⁶. And from here,

²⁷³ “Ce qnoma glorieux, qui est principe de notre vie, qui est parfait dans la vie imortelle, est dieu en Dieu, verbe dans l'incorruptibilité” (L. G. Rignell, *Briefe von Johannes dem Einsiedler*, p. 96).

²⁷⁴ For details see Patrick Hagman, *The Ascetism of Isaac of Niniveh*, Oxford, University Press, 2011, footnote 202, p. 88.

²⁷⁵ “‘More Interior than the Lips and the Tongue’: John of Apamea and Silent Prayer in Late Antiquity”, in *Journal of Early Christian Studies*, 12 (2012), 2, p. 301-331.

²⁷⁶ “It is to Him who is spirit that you are directing the movements of prayer. You should pray in spirit, seeing that He is spirit” (Sebastian Brock, ‘John the Solitary’, *On Prayer 1*, JTS 30 (1979), p. 84-101 (here, p. 89/97).

²⁷⁷ *On Prayer 2*, p. 89 (97).

²⁷⁸ *On Prayer 3*, p. 89-90 (98); see the hierarchy in *Liber Graduum* 13-14.

²⁷⁹ *Letter 3*, Sebastian Brock, ‘John the Solitary’, *On Prayer*, p. 86-87.

²⁸⁰ A. de Halleux shows that John uses here the term ‘mingling’ (ܠܚܡܐ) of Christ to describe the mystery of communion, as a model of Christ's association with us (“Christologie de Jean le Solitaire”, in *Le Museon*, 94 (1981), p. 5-36, here p. 33-35).

²⁸¹ It might be read in Monophysite key.

²⁸² ܠܚܡܐ ܠܢܦܫܐ ܠܠܗܘܐ ܠܠܗܘܐ; *Letter 3*.

²⁸³ ܠܠܗܘܐ.

²⁸⁴ ܠܠܗܘܐ.

²⁸⁵ ܠܠܗܘܐ.

it is better to be with God and not in the world of voice, desiring to become silence and not voice and word, realm attended expressly in the new world. Here comes the importance of the spiritual being that already foretastes the Kingdom of Heaven.

He also gives a great importance to the incarnation of the word in the voice during vocal prayer and, by that, stressing the continuity of the Incarnation process from the realm of the silence into that of the word and the voice²⁸⁷. In conclusion, John the Solitary seems to advance a perspective that gives space to Christological nuances and, consequently, supports a specific spiritualisation (and a spiritual knowledge of God, foretasted in the spiritual prayer), based on a communication between the Logos and human in Christ²⁸⁸. And yet, this idea remains only a hypothesis.

In a temporal framework, the other two authors condemned by the council are closer to Isaac. If we are to refer to John of Dalyatha, he might be considered one of Isaac's spiritual followers. He spent his life in the region of Qardu, where Isaac's writings were well-known. This idea can be supported if we think about Rabban Yozadaq, the founder of the homonym monastery, where John of Dalyatha spent some time²⁸⁹. Rabban Yozadaq wrote a letter to his disciple, Bushir, from Rabban Shabur Monastery, where Isaac spent his final part of life, to thank him for sending him Isaac's writings: "I praise God that you have occupied to send me Mar Isaac's writings. I know that you have gotten the Kingdom's keys, while being still alive, because you have filled up our monastery with vivified teaching and we consider ourselves disciples of Mar Isaac, bishop of Niniveh"²⁹⁰. In the same context, another element that proves Isaac's lively memory in this region is the existence of a monastery dedicated to him, next to Dosh River, in the neighbourhood of Shah Village, attested documentary in 1607, 1610, 1780²⁹¹. In reference to the timing of John Dalyatha, we can affirm that he was one generation later than Isaac. The scholars place his birth date around 690 and his death date before the council of Timothy (787)²⁹². Robert

²⁸⁶ Similar to John Dalyatha's phraseology.

²⁸⁷ The author of the article argues that John's mysticism is neither theophanic, nor ecstatic, but more a spiritual evolution, culminating with the inner liturgical silence (p. 26).

²⁸⁸ A. de Halleux argues that John of Apamea does not speak as a scholastic theologian, but more as a mystical one. In consequence, his very aim is not to systematically build a Christological discourse, but to theologically base his spirituality (cf. *Christologie de Jean le Solitaire*, p. 35).

²⁸⁹ Cf. J. M. Fiey, *Nisibe, métropole syriaque orientale*, 1977, p. 32, n. 5. Mar Yozadaq was Rabban Edta's disciple (the biographer of Abraham of Kashakar) and colleague of Rabban Hormizda, the founder of a homonym monastery by the middle of the seventh century. Mar Yozadaq founded his monastery by the first half of the seventh century (cf. J. M. Fiey, *Assyrie chrétienne*, II, Beyrouth, 1965, p. 533-541; 487, 778).

²⁹⁰ I. E. Rahmani, *Studia Syriaca I*, 1904, p. 33.

²⁹¹ J. M. Fiey, *Nisibe, métropole syriaque orientale*, p. 217-218.

²⁹² See also the biographical note on Dalyatha – *Book of Chastity*, n. 126, p. 55-56.

Beulay, in his monograph quoted above, dedicated to Dalyatha, hints at his dependence on the bishop of Niniveh's writings²⁹³, in terms of spirituality.

The last spiritual author among the three is Joseph Hazzaya, whose works represent a kind of synthesis and a systematisation of the East Syriac spiritual tradition. He was born around the first decade of the eighth century, in a pagan family, became prisoner of the Arabs. Embraced Christianity in the region of Qardu, by the influence of St. John of Kamul Monastery, and then entered Abba Saliba's Monastery in the region of Bet Nuhadra. Successively, he became hermit in the mountains of Qardu, then superior of Mar Basima Monastery, hermit again in the mountains of Adiabene, around the monastery of Rabban Bektisho²⁹⁴. As John Dalyatha, Joseph Hazzaya quotes Isaac and he considers his theological vision indebted to that of the bishop of Niniveh²⁹⁵. Besides the punctual quotations, a much more important element that brings together these authors with Isaac of Niniveh is the mystical ideas they profess. One might find in their writings the salient problematic themes for the Christological discussions of the time and more for the mystical theology, occasionally associated with Messalianism.

We will continue our research with the analysis of Timothy's council, by looking at the accusations regarding the theological insights of these two contemporary authors mentioned above. First of all, we do not have the documents of the council. What we can evoke is only a synodal letter, transmitted by the "Nomocanon of 'Abdisho bar Brikha"²⁹⁶, which mentions the condemnation and an Arab translation (a summary) of the anathema of the mystics²⁹⁷. And yet, we have a panorama that Elijah of Nisibis gives us, in the 11th century. Doing a description of the council, the author points out to an important element – there was a number of Christians who believed and professed that the Man assumed from Mary "sees" the eternal Lord. In consequence, a big gathering (formed of 16 metropolitans²⁹⁸, 30 bishops, numerous monks, savants and notable

²⁹³ For details see *L'enseignement spirituel de Jean le Dalyatha, mystique syro-oriental du VIII^e siècle*, Beuchet, Paris, 1990. Beulay argues that Dalyatha had some connections with the Messalians, in the sense that his spiritual master, Steven, was the disciple of Mar Jacob the Seer and Rabban Afni 'Maran, accused of this heresy. Both of them left the Monastery of Bet Abe, while being accused by their brothers of Messalianism. Then, the name of Nestorius of Nuhadra, as we will show later, is also connected to his monastery. We know about him that, before becoming bishop, he was asked to make a profession of faith precisely against Messalianism (See also A. Treiger, "Could Christ's Humanity See his Divinity? An Eight Century Controversy between John of Dalyatha and Timothy I, Catholicos of the Church of the East", in *Journal of Canadian Society for Syriac Studies* 9 (2009), p. 10-11).

²⁹⁴ See *Book of Chastity*, n. 125, p. 54-55.

²⁹⁵ Sabino Chialà, *Dall'asceti eremitica*, p. 283-284.

²⁹⁶ Vittorio Berti, *Vita e studi di Timoteo I († 823) patriarca cristiano di Baghdad. Ricerche sull'epistolario e sulle fonti contigue*, Paris (Cahiers de Studia Iranica 41, Chrétiens en terre d'Iran 3), p. 190-193.

²⁹⁷ *Bibliotheca Orientalis Clementina Vaticana III.1*, Roma, 1725, p. 100; Wilhelm Hoenerbach and Otto Spies, *Ibn at-Tayyib, Fiqh an-Nasraniya*, "Das Rech der Christenheit", Louvain, 1957, CSCO 167-168, p. 185-187 (187-188).

²⁹⁸ The contemporary scholars doubt the possibility of being present so many representatives (see Vittorio Berti, *Vita e studi di Timoteo I*, p. 192-193).

Christians) excommunicated all who believed that it was possible for human to have an ocular or intellectual vision of the eternal Verb, in this world or in the world to come²⁹⁹. The anathemas have been already analysed by Antoine Guillaumont and Robert Beulay³⁰⁰, and recently by Alexandre Treiger³⁰¹.

We are now going to particularly focus on the accusations of the council. From the document of Ibn at-Tayyib, one can observe that there is no clear motivation for John the Solitary's condemnation. For John Dalyatha, the Arab translator shows that he was condemned for his Modalist Trinitarian phraseology, naming the Son and the Holy Spirit divine "powers" of the Father, instead of persons, while Joseph Hazzaya was accused of Messalianist thesis:

- In order to receive the Holy Spirit one does not need to attend the offices, but to pray in hidden places;
- The perfect man does not need prayer anymore;
- The consecration of bread and wine by the Holy Spirit during incessant prayer; and
- The vision of divinity (named as Messalian).

The last part of the text underlines the main reason for the condemnation of the three mystics, the source of the other accusations: Mar Timothy anathematised all those who asserted that *the nature of Christ could see His divinity and those who said that it might be seen by some created beings*. Consequently, he added that *there was no human perfection in this world and the souls were not able to feel anything after leaving the body upon their return after the Judgement*.

Accepting that Christ's humanity is not able to see his divinity means asserting the impossibility for any human being of seeing God. This thesis came against the mystics' claim to see God, a constant of monastic theology³⁰². From a theological point of view, the possible

²⁹⁹ Élie bar Šennaya, *Kitab-al-Majalis*, cf. Khalil Samir, "Entretien d'Élie de Nisibe avec le vizir Ibn' Alī sur l'unité et la trinité", in *Islamochristiana* 5, 1979, p. 31-117 (here p. 90, n. 17)

³⁰⁰ For Joseph Hazzaya, A. Guillaumont, "Sources de la doctrine de Joseph Hazzāyā", in *Oriens Syrien*, 3.1, p. 3-24 ; Robert Beulay, "Joseph Hazzaya", *Dictionnaire de Spiritualité* VIII, col. 1341-1349 ; for John Dalyatha : Robert Beulay, *L'enseignement spirituel de Jean le Dalyatha, mystique syro-oriental du VIII^e siècle*, Beuchesne, Paris, 1990.

³⁰¹ *Could Christ's Humanity see his Divinity?*, p. 2-21.

³⁰² If we are to make a retrospective, we will point to some important voices from the Antiochene tradition as well as from the East Syriac space, evoked by Robert Beulay in his monograph dedicated to John of Dalyatha: John Chrysostom, although he does not accept any vision of God's essence, he points to the possibility of communicating with Christ's resplendence of his glorified humanity; for Theodore of Mopsuestia, the nature of God is made visible under a form adapted to human's capacity, in the corporal Man Jesus. Divinity acts by such means. The possibility of divine vision reflects only seeing its image in the body of Christ; Theodoret of Cyr asserts that God reveals Himself in a real way in the corporal humanity of Christ. The divine nature becomes visible in Christ's nature by the means of his power manifested in the miracles and in Church's sacraments; Ephrem uses the apophatic language while interpreting Moses' life and argues that, while Moses had the vision of God's glory, he knew that seeing means not seeing. Human cannot see God's essence, but his glory, because of God's condescendence by which he proportioned the vision of his glory to the human capacity of pertaining; another important author is Narsai. For him Christ resplendent of glory will make humans able to see without seeing the hidden Being. Christ's humanity, principle of divine essence among us, will be as an image for the

explanation that stands behind this anathema is of Christological nature. The idea of divine vision brings with it the acceptance of communication between the natures in Christ. In this context, we can identify two suspicions that Timothy and the institutional theology had at that time – the fear of Monophysism, respectively, a kind of spiritualization of the body (of Christ) up to Docetism (associated with Messalianism). This idea may be better advocated if we remember another important event colligated with the election of Nestorius as bishop of Bet Nuhadra, the biographer of Joseph Hazzaya, connected with the Monastery of Rabban Yozadaq. As an exponent of a charismatic community, before being elected bishop, he was asked by the party of ecclesiastical officials to make a profession of faith regarding the East Syriac Christology, in reference to the strict distinction between Christ's humanity and divinity and the eternal existence of the Verb (Word) vis-à-vis that of Man Jesus (against those who deny the humanity and the divinity of Jesus and, specifically, against the Monophysite and Chalcedonian Christology)³⁰³, and, in consequence, against Messalianist theses. Finally, the profession points again to the three mystical consequences, essential for our discussion and three anathemas for those advocating them:

- The divine nature is incorporeal, limitless and invisible, while the human nature is corporal, limited and visible; so, in Christ, there is no possibility for human nature to experience the vision of the divine nature;

exterior senses and, by the means of mind, it will have some knowledge of the essence, that remains invisible; Babai the Great, the radical East Syriac conservatory theologian, argues that there is a gradual knowledge of God. By the means of symbols and images God reveals his justice and providence in the saints and more in Christ, in which dwells the plenitude of divinity. Borrowing the Evagrian language, he speaks about the knowledge of God in creation, the knowledge of the intelligible beings, by the elevation of soul above the earthly reality, so the contemplation of the corporals and intelligible beings and, finally, the knowledge of the Son, who surpasses all other knowledge by the unique knowledge of the Trinity, that we will see, but not in a vision. It is about the glory and the light of the face of Christ, mirror and image of the Essence of God. He also uses an apophatic language in the line of Pseudo Dionysius the Areopagite when he speaks about un-knowledge and union in the cloud with One who is unknowable. In fact, there is no knowledge, but a look without desire of knowing, a loving conscience of the absolute transcendence of God, constituting for human the supreme and beatific delectation (p. 423-440). I will add four important authors in matter of the mystics of vision: Evagrius, despite the fact that he clearly states that God is incomprehensible in Himself and his nature is unknowable, he also argues that the spiritual intellect is the visionary of the Holy Trinity and that a real theologian is the one who sees God (Evagre le Pontique, *Les six centuries des Kephalaia Gnostica d'Evagre le Pontique*, ed. Antoine Guillaumont, PO, Paris, Brepols, 1958, 5.51-52, 57, 63; 3.30 ; 5.26) ; Pseudo Macarius, in the Syriac translation, speaks about the vision of God, giver of life, with the hidden eye of our intelligence, safeguarding God's transcendence that surpasses all vision; the cognitive eye of the inner man is fixed on the insatiable, splendid, unknowable and completely incomprehensible Beauty, so that soul is absorbed in love by this divine nature (cf. Robert Beulay, *Jean de Dalyatha*, p. 442); Gregory of Nyssa, using an apophatic language, points to the transcendence of God, while stating also the possibility of seeing him during the limitless progression in the union with God (Gregorio di Nissa, *La vita di Mosè*, a cura di Manlio Simonetti, Fondazione Lorenzo Valla, Arnoldo Mondadori Editore, 1996, § 220, 227, 235); in the same way, the darkness, in the language of Dionysius, is not equivalent to the absence of divine vision. He speaks more about a super vision, bringing together the un-knowledge and the divine vision in the darkness (*Mystical theology*, I.1 PG 3, 997B, I.3, PG 3, 1000A; *The divine names*, I.4, PG 3, 592C).

³⁰³ For details see Vittorio Berti, "Grazia, visione e natura in Nestorio di Nuhadra, solitario e vescovo siro-orientale", in *Annali di Scienze Religiose* 10 (2005), p. 229-232.

- Advocating a divine vision means accepting a changing and transformation of the natures in Jesus Christ or the spiritualisation of the humanity, not acceptable for their theology; the human nature in Christ is simple and without composition;
- In the mystical realm, there is no perfection in this world while being in the body and there is no knowledge or action out of the body³⁰⁴.

We can easily observe that Nestorius' abjuration and profession of faith reflects the same salient points problematic in Timothy's council. These are the consequences of a Christological vision that, colligated to a specific anthropology, develops in a certain courageous and non-official mystical school.

Vittorio Berti, in the article dedicated to Timothy's council, also addressed the anthropological vision of Timothy and, in a way, makes it responsible for his attitude. We will not analyse it in detail, but we will point to some conclusions of his research and try to apply them into our discussion. We consider there are mainly four important aspects to take into consideration. Firstly, for Timothy, human means body and soul, collaborating for the natural order of the human person. There is no pre-existence of the soul (as in Origen's anthropology) or the spiritualisation of the post-Paschal body. The human knowledge reflects this unity and remains created all the time.

The second important element refers to the intellect's potentiality of knowing God. He reasoned saying that if, par absurd, the intellect had been able to encompass God partially or completely, it would be superior to the divine nature, as that which encompasses is better than the encompassed one. But God is not fragments, nor totality. Therefore, knowledge is possible only by faith.

A third idea points to the bipartite structure of human (not tripartite as in Evagrius' case). The intellect is not separated from soul as to be an intermediary between humanity and divinity. Therefore, it is a means for knowing creation and not divine things.

And the fourth idea is colligated with the powers of the human being, soul and body. He speaks about five powers³⁰⁵, two of them of the soul (rationality and will), other two of the soul by the union with the body (concupiscence and irascibility) and the vitality. The first couple is active while the body is alive, but appears again after resurrection; the second couple remains as much as human is living, after it disappears; only vitality is always active. In this context he

³⁰⁴ Cf. Oscar Braun, "Briefe des Katholikos Timotheos I", in *Oriens Christianus* 2, p. 1-32 (here 301-309).

³⁰⁵ Isaac of Niniveh also speaks about five powers, as we will later deal with: simple rationality, composed rationality, will, irascibility and vitality (II, 3.3, 77; II, 18, 18).

speaks about the “sleeping of the soul”, which has no cognitive autonomy without the body³⁰⁶. The natural conclusion shows there is no vision or intellection outside the union between the body and the soul.

All these observations applied to Christology generate some important consequences. The body remains composite, there is no transformation or change on what concerns the ontological dimension of the created beings. The difference appears at the level of corruption and sin, which were not inherent to Jesus’s body by Incarnation. Then deification is accomplished by the fact that the human hypostasis is established in the divine hypostasis and, in what he calls “natural person” of his filiation, is represented the image of his divinity. The simple conclusion of this demonstration is that there is no vision of the divine nature, but mostly achieving the royalty and the participation to the divinity in his dimension of sovereignty on the creation³⁰⁷. As Vittorio Berti states, behind this condemnation, in the frame of Timothy’s anthropology, stands the fear of becoming Monophysites – God is simple, the human nature of Jesus and of all human beings is composite. Therefore, accepting certain knowledge and, consequently, a divine vision, would bring the risk of affirming that, after resurrection, Christ’s human nature will dissipate into the divine nature. Therefore, faith³⁰⁸ remains the only means for knowing God.

Besides the aspects already mentioned around Timothy’s perspective, we can also add that he accepts a kind of speculative and intellectual vision of God’s glory, by means of an experiential reading of Scripture, in order to achieve the knowledge of Christ’s royalty. The paradigm for this process is the transfiguration on Mount Tabor³⁰⁹. But still, this glory is created, as pertaining to the body of Jesus, and remains composite. This would be the nodal point with the mystical theology professed both by John Dalyatha and Joseph Hazzaya, as well as with Isaac’s, as we will show later on.

It is important to remember that both savants mentioned above, Guillaumont and Beulay, after analysing the accusations, had demonstrated Catholikos Timothy’s misreading and misunderstanding of the mystics’ theology, arguing that he and his party maliciously interpreted their writings³¹⁰. This idea might well be integrated into the general context of the opposition

³⁰⁶ See *Timothei Patriarchae Epistulae* I, ed. Oscar Braun, CSCO 74, Paris Leipzig, 1914, p. 50-52 (*Timothei Patriarchae Epistulae*, latin by Oscar Braun, CSCO 75, Paris Leipzig, 1914, p. 32).

³⁰⁷ Timothy, *Timothei Patriarchae Epistulae*, p. 176-177 (120); for details see also Vittorio Berti, *Le débat sur la vision de Dieu et la condamnation des mystiques par Timothée I^{er}*, p. 168-170.

³⁰⁸ One should be attentive as in Isaac’s writings, faith has multiple meanings. Here ‘faith’ expresses a common (ascetic) level of knowledge, out of any mystical dimension.

³⁰⁹ We have already mentioned that Babai himself, interpreting Evagrius theology, speaks about the vision of God’s glory and light. He does not accept a vision of divine nature, but shows an open attitude regarding the mystics of light.

³¹⁰ Cf. Vittorio Berti, *Le débat sur la vision de Dieu et la condamnation des mystiques par Timothée I^{er}*, p. 156.

between the episcopal scholastic and mystical monastic institutions. Moreover, Alexander Treiger contextualised this event at a larger scale and stated that the condemnation might be a result of a hidden homologation by the cultural East Syriac elite of the Islamic culture, during a difficult period (the Arab spreading and the West Syriac proselytism), and, consequently, failed to accept any form of divine knowledge³¹¹.

To support the thesis enunciated above (the misreading of the mystics' texts), we consider it would be useful to take a short look at some key texts of the authors in discussion, that will help us to better clarify the context and to draw some final conclusion of this chapter. It is true that John of Dalyatha frequently uses the expression "vision of God" so as to describe the intimacy of human with his Creator. There are some important aspects to be mentioned in reference to this expression. Firstly, he uses an image common for eastern Mystics – the mirror and the "vision in the mirror" of the soul, spirit or being (intellect), which means the faithful reflection of the Prototype, safeguarding its transcendence. For a good vision, one needs to achieve the limpidity. This phraseology reflects what we call apophatic theology. In the same line, the divine vision occurs in what he calls "obscure light" and this builds a bridge with a very important theme for our analysis – the difference between the nature and the divine glory. Robert Beulay, in the monograph dedicated to this author, underlines that, eight times in his work, Dalyatha points to the difference between the nature and the glory of God³¹². In order to support this idea, he frequently borrows the image of the fire that is commonly ascribed to the Alexandrine authors and he states that as the operation of the fire is hidden, so is the nature of God, while the action of the fire is visible, so is the glory of God³¹³. Therefore, divinity operates and makes itself visible by its glory. He also employs the image of the sun and its rays to express the same distinction³¹⁴.

Analysing Joseph Hazzaya's mystical system, the same scholar shows that, when he speaks about the contemplation of God's glory, he does not indicate a sharp distinction between the nature and the glory of Christ, nor does he make clear comparisons between the nature, the glory and the royalty of Christ³¹⁵. But Isaac seems to be familiar with this difference. We will give a

³¹¹ *Could Christ's Humanity See His Divinity?*, p. 12.

³¹² *L'enseignement spirituel de Jean de Dalyatha*, p. 447.

³¹³ "De même que le feu manifeste aux yeux son opération, de même Dieu montre sa gloire aux êtres rationnels qui sont purs" (*Centurie* 1.17, H. 31b, transl. Robert Beulay, *L'enseignement spirituel de Jean de Dalyatha*, p. 448).

³¹⁴ *Centurie* 1.27, H. 32a.

³¹⁵ *L'enseignement spirituel de Jean de Dalyatha*, p. 449. But, his biographer, Nestorius of Nuhadra, when speaking about the spiritual vision, clearly underlines that it is not about seeing the nature, but the divine glory. We will quote two short examples to support that: "rallegria il cuore dei giusti con una visione spirituale (ܐܘܪܝܬܐ ܕܐܝܠܐ) di cui per la loro volontà si sono privati... A questi saggi che dicono con furore, non sapendo: 'Come si vede (ܐܘܪܝܬܐ) la natura divina (ܐܠܗܐ ܕܡܪܝܬܐ)?', risponderò: 'O incredulo, non dico che è vista la natura, ma la gloria della sua grandezza (ܐܘܪܝܬܐ)... luce (ܐܘܪܝܬܐ) della Santa Trinità'" ("Sull'inizio del movimento della grazia divina" §7, 9, cf. Vittorio Berti, *Grazia, visione e natura in Nestorio di Nuhadra*, p. 237-238 (241-242).

suggestive example: “As a result of the practical discovery of the things that belong to him, a person is raised up in his thoughts to the contemplation of Him; this constitutes the true vision³¹⁶ of Him, not of his nature³¹⁷, but of the dark cloud of his glory”³¹⁸.

It is interesting to point out a fragment where John describes the dynamics of the spiritual life by using these two terms in relation – the divine vision is limitless and at each degree brings a continual transformation and resemblance of this glory. Moreover, by the strong connection between the glory and the nature of Christ, he seems to approach the later definitions during hesychast disputes. It is worth quoting this paragraph: “Sa nature, en effet, est une lumière glorieuse aux multiples resplendissements; et la lumière de sa nature, il la fait voir dans tous les mondes à ceux qui l’aiment – je veux dire sa gloire et non sa nature – et il change la forme de ceux qui la voient en la forme de la gloire”³¹⁹. He goes one step further by saying that, during this process, there is a clear conviction of seeing the glory, but nature as well. Only the posterior reflections bring forth the conclusion that it was about the vision of the glory and not of the essence. To doctrinally support the argument, he makes use of the comparison with the fire and the iron – while being together, they apparently seem to mingle, but, in fact, they exist with their own properties. And yet one can speak about a transformation at the resemblance or form level, while being penetrated by the glory. The glory, as an expression of God’s nature, does not touch at all the latter one³²⁰. This way, John gives generous space for the idea of unity with God³²¹.

Despite the bold expression on the possibility of knowing God, the authors in question place their perspective in the same East Syriac Christological frame. That means that the divine vision is possible in the mirror, but only by the means of Christ’s glorified body. Beulay quotes an interesting excerpt from Dalyatha’s work, to express this idea: “Le Père n’est vu que par sa Connaissance; donc dans l’Habitation de la Connaissance (l’humanité à laquelle le Verbe s’est uni) sont vus le Père et l’Esprit”³²². Christ’s humanity is associated with the vision of the Father and the Spirit. The mystery of the Father is revealed in Christ’s union. We will quote another important paragraph that confirms Dalyatha’s East Syriac Christological phraseology:

De même qu’il ne pas possible que la nature du feu se montre à la vue corporelle, mais que par le moyen d’une matière son opération se rend visible à la vue des yeux : de la

³¹⁶ ܬܝܘܬܐ.

³¹⁷ ܡܬܝܢܐ.

³¹⁸ ܡܬܝܢܐ ܕܝܠܕܐܝܬܐ ; II, 10, 17.

³¹⁹ Robert Beulay, *L’enseignement spirituel de Jean de Dalyatha*, p. 452.

³²⁰ Robert Beulay, *L’enseignement spirituel de Jean de Dalyatha*, p. 454.

³²¹ It will be very interesting to try to compare Dalyatha’s mystical theology with that of the Hesychastes. We might arrive at very interesting conclusions.

³²² *Homélie 25. V 33b*, cf. Robert Beulay, *L’enseignement spirituel de Jean de Dalyatha*, p. 456.

*même manière l'œil noétique ne peut voir la Nature divine sans le temple adoré de l'humanité de Notre Seigneur qui est L'image de l'invisibilité du Père, Image dans laquelle e par laquelle la Sainte Trinité e vue de l'esprit rational e pur*³²³.

The same idea is clearly expressed by Joseph Hazzaya when he states: “Pour tous les êtres rationnels, visibles et invisibles, l'humanité de Notre Seigneur sera un miroir dans lequel ils verront Dieu le Verbe qui habite en eux”³²⁴. Isaac of Niniveh goes along with this idea and shows that Christ is the key towards the Father: “By You, my Lord, I enter to the Father and I receive insights of the grace of Your Holy Spirit. O Christ, key of the mysteries and end of the mysteries: by You, my Lord, the door is opened for us to the mysteries which from of old were hidden in Your Father”³²⁵.

By means of Christ's body, the human is able to participate to God's glory at the soul or the heart level. The theological fundament for participating at Christ's glorified body is the so called concept “spiritual body” of Christ after his resurrection and consequently human's body in the new life (according to 1 Corinthians 15:44). The same scholar evoked in the last lines identified the source of this concept in Evagrius' theology, interpreted by the mystics in a spiritual sense – it pertains to the new world, already foretasted on earth, by the grace of God, the “light without form”, and everything is penetrated by it. Therefore, Christ's body is free of the material limits and any composition and this is how he may dwell in human's heart³²⁶. One may identify here a possible connection with the spiritual perspective of John the Solitary, analysed above.

We can synthetize this debate into two observations: the mystics advocate a divine vision, not of the divine nature, but of the divine glory and the light “of the divine nature”. So, even in Christ, humanity participates to the light and the glory of divinity. And secondly, the doctrine of the divine vision is based on the “spiritualization” of the body after resurrection, and, in a way, in consequence, the body loses its composite structure, becoming simple³²⁷. These doctrines are associated either with Monophysism or with Messalianism.

Nonetheless, the authors mentioned in our research, who dedicated serious studies to these issues, brought some nuances. As we pointed above, they speak mostly about the vision of divine glory and light, which are of the divine nature, but not the vision of the divine nature itself. Moreover, one can easily observe in that period that the phraseology was not yet well established

³²³ *Centurie* I.2, H 31a, cf. Robert Beulay, *L'enseignement spirituel de Jean de Dalyatha*, p. 457.

³²⁴ *Centurie* 6,8, cf. Robert Beulay, *L'enseignement spirituel de Jean de Dalyatha*, p. 457.

³²⁵ III, 7,31.

³²⁶ *Centurie* 1.30; 4.24. For instance, Joseph Hazzaya, when he speaks about the divine vision in the spirit, he places it during limpidity, and he shows that it is without form and figure, as he is all clothed in the unique vision of the light without form. In stating this idea, he refers to Isaac of Niniveh. And also the glory of the resurrected one is without form (see Robert Beulay, *La lumière sans forme*, p. 32-33).

³²⁷ These two ideas are present in the abjuration and the profession of faith made by Nestorius of Nuhadra.

as it was, for instance, later on, in the Byzantine world, during the hesychaste disputes. Therefore, if they sometimes use indiscriminately the terms nature, glory or light, they do that as there was no clear precedent of this vocabulary.

Then, as Beulay argues, the concept of “spiritual body” is of biblical origin, and has more connection with Evagrius theology than with Messalian perspective. If we are to accept Treiger’s thesis, we have to take into consideration the historical difficult times of this event, characterized by an eschatological imminence. That happened because of the conversions to Islam, which were rapidly increasing, then the Jacobite were also increasing their influence in the East Syriac territories as they were no longer discriminated by the rulers in the Sassanid time. In this frame, a “modalist” presentation of the Trinity and a strict dyophysite Christology seemed to be closer to the Islamic theology and, in consequence, this approach must have been more useful and immune to Muslim criticism regarding Christian doctrine. Therefore, Timothy must have regarded Messalianism as a dangerous phenomenon, based on at least three reasons. Firstly, if we accept the doctrine of the divine vision, there is the danger of merging the divine and human nature in Christ, therefore, vulnerable to the Jacobite and Chalcedonian doctrine, while the Nestorian version of Christology was much more immune and convenient to the Islamic theology. Secondly, Messalianism seemed to bring a kind of disdain for the Church hierarchy, one step forward towards apostasy and conversion to other faiths, in a time of great social pressure to convert to Islam. And, finally, the Catholikos could not have had another attitude but to frown upon a mystical system that seemed to attack and devalue their Church’s tradition. In consequence, his decision aimed to strengthen the ecclesiastical discipline and to achieve a better place for the ecclesiastical institution within the political and social landscape of the time³²⁸.

2.4 Isaac of Niniveh and the theological disputes in the East Syriac community

As we have learnt from the previous chapter, there are mainly two short notes around Isaac’s biography, due to Ishod’nah de Basra and an anonym author, published by Rahmani. The bishop of Basra offers us two interesting pieces of information around Isaac, which are most probably colligated. The first one refers to some of Isaac’s sentences that were contested by Daniel bar Tubanitha, bishop of Bet Garmai; the other one, located at the very end of the note, lists the name of Isaac next to that of John of Apamea, John Dalyatha and Joseph Hazzaya, while stressing the reason for his resignation from the see of Niniveh – the envy of the contemporary, the same attitude manifested against these three spiritual personalities. If the first source is dated

³²⁸ For details see *Could Christ’s Humanity See his Divinity*, p. 12-13.

9th century, the second one 15th century, but, as Paolo Bettio suggests, the latter one might have used information and material very close to the events it evokes, around Rabban Shabur Monastery, taking into consideration the details it gives concerning Mar Yozadaq in his correspondence with Bushir, from Rabban Shabur Monastery, and the pacifist tone of the text³²⁹. He places the sources of this text at the middle of the 8th century, in a time of a silent reception of Isaac's writings, after the first polemic stage³³⁰. This text mentions Isaac's subtle mind, to explain his resignation.

In a third note, dated 9-10th century, Hanun Ibn Yuhanna Ibn as-Salt³³¹ also evokes the contestations raised against some of Isaac's sentences. He writes that one of his visitors, Abu al-'Abbas 'Isa Ibn Zayd Ibn Abi Malik, "home connu pour ses sentiments religieux, son intelligence, sa bonté et son mérite"³³², remembers that the Catholikos John Ibn Narsai, spent one day next to him reading the works of Isaac. Being asked about his opinion on Isaac's theology and the contestation of Daniel, he had responded clearly that "Mar Isaac speaks the language of the beings in Heaven and Daniel speaks the language of the beings of earth"³³³. We do not know exactly what the three problematic ideas were, but we know from Abdisho of Nisibe (13th century)³³⁴ that Daniel addressed a work against the so called "The Fifth Part" of Isaac's works. Sabino Chialà had published two homilies that possibly belonged to this collection, dedicated to God's providence³³⁵. If their authenticity can be proven, one might get an idea about the argument of the contestation³³⁶.

Around these items of information, Dana Miller advances two possible explanations: either the lofty teachings of Isaac shook Daniel's theological conceptions, or the envy and the malice against the saint, as pointed in Isho'dnah's notice³³⁷. Ibn as-Salt gives us some more information which might support these hypotheses. When speaking about the way Isaac's writings were received and read during his time, he asserts: "This holy man wrote his epistles and works for

³²⁹ For details see Paolo Bettio, *Congetture intorno a un'assenza*, p. 150.

³³⁰ Paolo Bettio, *Congetture intorno a un'assenza*, p. 149-150.

³³¹ His monastery at that time was Mar Jonah ad al-Anbar, founded by a hermit with a homonyme name in the 7th century (for details see J. M. Fiey, *Assyrie chrétienne III- Bé Garmaï Bet Aramayé et Maishan nestoriens*, Dar El-Machreq Éditeurs, Bayrouth, 1968, p. 237-238).

³³² Cf. *Traité religieux, philosophique et moraux, extraits des oeuvres d'Isaac de Ninive (VIIe siècle) par Ibn as-Salt (IXe siècle)*, P. Spath éd., Imp. 'Al-Chark', Le Caire, 1934, p. 109.

³³³ *Traité religieux, philosophique et moraux*, p. 109.

³³⁴ *Scriptorium Ecclesiasticorum Catalogus*, 1725, p. 104.

³³⁵ "Due discorsi della Quinta Parte di Isacco di Ninive?", in *Orientalia Christiana Periodica*, 79 (2013), p. 61-112.

³³⁶ It is about the very optimistic tone of the discourses up to expressing the idea of a final restauration. On this connection see S. Chialà, "Two Discourses of the *Fifth Part* of Isaac the Syrian's Writings: Prolegomena for Apokatastasis?", in *The 3 Syriac Writers of Qatar in the Seventh Century*, Gorgias Press, 2014, p. 123-132..

³³⁷ Cf. "Translator's Introduction: A Historical Account of the Life and Writings of the Saint Isaac the Syrian", in Dana Miller, *The Ascetical Homilies of St Isaac the Syrian*, Boston, Holy Transfiguration Monastery, 1984, p. LXXXIII.

perfect monks in whom he perceived a pure intellect, abundant understanding, indeficient knowledge, and perfect worship of God. And they, in turn, worshipped his writings, acknowledged their truth, adhered to his path, and were aided by the excellence of his guidance. Then these monks unanimously agreed to withhold his writings from all who were unable to comprehend them”³³⁸. In one other place he stresses the same idea: “The reading of Mar Isaac’s writings is only suitable for a man who has plunged into the divine Scriptures, whose soul is apt for inquiries of the intellect and who has avoided the lust of the world in his thoughts and his mind... Youths have been rightly forbidden to delve into the secrets of the writings of this virtuous man, because wisdom is only known by its adherents”³³⁹.

Another element that might help us in dealing with Isaac’s polemic themes can be found in the prologue of Ibn as-Salt collection. One can learn that there were six ideas not completely conformed to the opinion of some of the others. They are listed below synthetically:

- Did God create Adam for life or for death? The opinion of some is that he was created for life, and death appeared because of his disobedience. Isaac’s opinion was that Adam was created for death and, consequently, his disobedience is part of God’s providence;
- Is God incited at anger by the disobedience of his created beings? The opinion of some is that disobedience is the cause for God’s anger and that penitence may appease Him. Isaac argues that God is not provoked by human’s behaviour so as to change his attitude regarding human beings. God’s punishment is part of his providence;
- Is it right for God to punish for a temporary sin in eternity? The opinion of some is yes, but Isaac insists that God’s bounty is unchangeable and above this sanction;
- Will God’s mercy embrace the just and the sinners differentially in the world to come? Some argue that the just will be deigned to God’s mercy, but not the sinners, while Isaac argues that he will embrace them indiscriminately;
- Are the goods of this world given proportionally with somebody’s ascesis and dignity, or by God’s providence? Some argue that according to their behaviour, but Isaac places them within the action of providence³⁴⁰;

³³⁸ *Traité religieux, philosophique et moraux*, p. 109.

³³⁹ *Traité religieux, philosophique et moraux*, p. 75-76.

³⁴⁰ And yet, one can identify a kind of hierarchy of gifts corresponding to the different spiritual conducts of the people.

- Will the souls, separated by their bodies, be capable of the knowledge acquired in this world? The opinion of some is that there is no knowledge out of the body, but Isaac argues that the soul in itself does not separate from life, or knowledge³⁴¹.³⁴²

One can observe in this list that the themes that are more controversial refer to the infinite mercy of God and consequently, his eschatological vision³⁴³. In addition, we can identify the Theodorian theory of the originary death and the pedagogical dimension of earthly life; God's immutability, the reason of asserting that human's sin cannot change God's plan and, in consequence, there is no eternal punishment, as all will be embraced by God's mercy; the negation of retribution, for everything moves within Providence and not directly as a result of human virtues; and, lastly, Ibn as-Salt advocates a continuity between the earthly and the heavenly life, for the soul does not lose the cognitive capacity upon the body's death. Based on this, Sabino Chialà concludes that the stress on God's love and eschatology were the problematic issues that provoked the contesters, especially Daniel bar Tubanitha, themes considered up to the 20th century "les défauts de l'ouvrage"³⁴⁴.

There is a second interesting interrogation regarding Isaac's place in the ecclesiological landscape of his time. It is focused on the reason of his resignation from the see of Niniveh, after only five months from his election as bishop of this city. Isho'dnah of Basra gives no explanation for his withdrawal, he mentions only that "he abdicated his episcopacy by a reason which God knows", while the text of Rahmani names "the acuteness of his intellect and his zeal" as the main reason to leave the see of Niniveh. This might be an argument, taking into consideration the loftiness of his theology, as we have underlined above. A third simplistic explanation, this time evoked by Joseph Assemani and assumed by Nikephoros Theotokis, is found in Vatican's 198th Manuscript. This short extract states that shortly after his election as bishop of Niniveh, Isaac faces a trite situation – he was asked to judge the cause of one man against his debtor. When he appealed to Scripture, by asking the one who had lent the money to forget about the debt or, at least, to prolong the loan refund term, the answer of the rich man was to lay aside the Scripture. The conclusion Isaac drew was that, if the gospel is not present, then his place is not there. And he

³⁴¹ It is not so clear expressed in Isaac's writings the idea of the cognitive capacity of human after his death, during the separation from the body. He mentions the continuation of vitality, one of the five soul's powers connected with life, but less with self conscience or knowledge. Anyhow, after the reunification of the soul with the body, other two of the soul's powers – simple rationality and natural desire, by which human "knows" and "feels" God.

³⁴² Cf. *Traité religieux, philosophique et moraux*, p. 16-19. The last idea might be easily connected to Patriarch Timothy's anthropological vision.

³⁴³ Ibn as-Salt synthesises the message of Isaac's works in two salient themes – the love and the mercy of God (*Traité religieux, philosophique et moraux*, p. 11).

³⁴⁴ Sabino Chialà, *Dall'asceti eremitica*, p. 63 (P. Bedjan, *Mar Isaacus Ninivita. De Perfectione Religiosa*, p. XII-XIII).

decided to go back to his hermitical life³⁴⁵. This information might be correlated to an internal detail, where Isaac speaks about one hermit who left his solitary life and became bishop. The loss of divine grace is considered to be the result of changing his lifestyle. This recite might be an autobiographical piece of information³⁴⁶. This way of dealing is recurrent for monastics. Nevertheless, this last theory has no solid base to be accepted.

Around this problem, Sabino Chialà advances three hypotheses: Isaac's attachment to the solitary life, pointed above, a time of crisis for his church, and his difficulty to integrate in a region far away from his native land³⁴⁷. Among these three hypotheses, we believe the most consistent and valid one refers to the polemical atmosphere that characterised his timing. We refer here at two components – canonical and theological.

We remember from the short biographies we have that Isaac had been taken by Catholikos George, when he came to his native region in 676 to convoke a council³⁴⁸ so as to solve an old conflict between the Metropolis of Rev Ardashir, which was at that time in schism with the See of Seleucia. He was ordained bishop in Bet Abe Monastery, in North Mesopotamia, where Isho'yahb III and George Himself received their monastic formation. In this context appears the “envy of those who dwelt in the interior”³⁴⁹ for somebody coming from Bet Qatraye. Adjacently, stressing again Isaac's pacifist attitude in a time of harsh proselytist West Syriac attitude³⁵⁰, we can easily understand that he might have been not very well welcomed and he did not feel at ease in this situation. Despite the fact that Isho'dnah does not condition Isaac's abdication on “the envy” of his faithful, but on the contestation around his theology, one can easily argue that this element occupies an important place when dealing with Isaac's position within the ecclesiastical landscape of his community.

There are still things to be clarified around Isaac of Niniveh and the internal tensions in the East Syriac Church of his time. In the subchapter above we have already evoked some new research directions that bring new information on this topic. Adjacently, an important observation refers to the rapid spreading of Isaac's works and their influence from the northern Qardu to the southern Bet Aramaye and Eastern Bet Huzaye. Referring to Mar Yozadaq, the founder of the

³⁴⁵ J. S. Assemani, *Bibliotheca Orientalis Clementino-Vaticana I*, Romae, Propaganda Fidae, 1725, p. 445.

³⁴⁶ I, 35, p. 167 (B, 249); One may find occasionally this interpretation in different recites from the desert Fathers' stories.

³⁴⁷ Sabino Chialà, *Dall'asceti eremitica*, p. 81.

³⁴⁸ For the canons of the Council see J. B. Chabot (ed.), *Synodicon Orientale*, 1902, p. 215-226 (480-490).

³⁴⁹ The territories around Tigris and Euphrates. The ecclesiastical provinces were divided into “internal”, the oldest ones, whose leaders participated to the patriarchal councils, and “external”, formed of territories recently evangelized, whose leader did not participate to the patriarch's election and they were designated directed by this one (Cf. A. M. Eddé – F. Michau – C. Pirard, *Communautés chrétiennes en pays d'Islam*, 1997, p. 26).

³⁵⁰ See the foundation of Metropolis of Tagrit (628-629).

homonym monastery (the first half of the 7th century), from the region of Qardu, he writes to Bushir, a brother in the monastery of Rabban Shabur (where Isaac spent his last period of life), to manifest his gratitude for sending Isaac's writings to them, "his disciples"³⁵¹. In the same frame, we remember that Ibn as-Salt, residing in Mar Jonah Monastery, gives evidence about the familiarity of his monastery with Isaac's writings.

Besides that, it would be of great importance to refer to Isaac's possible connections with the so called Messalian polemics. It is useful to bring into discussion again the first biographical note of Isho'dnah, from where one can learn about Isaac's three themes that produced reactions and the listing of his name next to the mystics condemned by Patriarch Timothy I. Fiey argues that the Metropolitan of Basra uses a neutral tone in his writings, except when he manifests a clear positive position regarding the three mystics – Isaac of Niniveh, Joseph Hazzaya and John Dalyatha³⁵², demonstrating that his opinion was "not always according to the official doctrine of his Church"³⁵³. Paolo Bettolo shows that this is due to the direct attitude against Timothy's council and the sentencing of the three mystics. However, one can nuance Isho'dnah attitude – it reveals divergences with Timothy's position, but, at the same time, convergences with his successor, Isho'bar Nun³⁵⁴. It is also true that Isaac was not condemned in the "process of the mystics", and yet it seems Isho'dnah identifies a connection between him and them, adding his name on the list³⁵⁵.

In the same frame, next to this information, we remember that during Isaac's time there was a suspicion of Messalianism around a few important characters, who eventually had to leave the monastery, after a lot of contestation from their brothers. It was the case of Mar Afnimaran, who founded a monastery, which John Dalyatha frequented before joining the monastic life, and Jacob Hazzaya, both of them spiritual fathers of Blessed Steven, the master of Dalyatha, in Mar Yozadaq Monastery³⁵⁶. This monastery was also accused of Messalianism, if we remember that Nestorius of Nuhadra, monk in this convent, when elected bishop of Bet Nuhadra, was asked to do an anti-Messalian profession of faith, before his ordination. Then, the latter one

³⁵¹ See the note of Rahmani.

³⁵² Cf. Fiey, "Ichô'dnah, métropolitte de Basra, et son œuvre", in *Orient syrien* XI (1966), p. 431-450 (here p. 450); "Isho'dnah et la Chronique de Seert", in *Mélanges offerts au R.P François Graffin – Parole de l'Orient* 6/7 (1975-1976), p. 447-459 (here 449-450).

³⁵³ *Ichô'dnah, métropolitte de Basra, et son œuvre*, p. 449.

³⁵⁴ Paolo Bettolo, *Congettura intorno a un'assenza*, p. 154.

³⁵⁵ As Paolo Bettolo argues, it is interesting to notice that Thomas of Marga, the historian who focused on Timothy's itinerary and, in consequence, on Bet Abe Monastery, says nothing about Isaac of Niniveh. His hypothesis advocates that his interest was to justify Timothy's activity and to put it under God's providence. Therefore he takes the key-characters directly connected to his pastoral endeavour, while putting under silence some other ones, less important for his evolution (the case of Isaac). For details see Paolo Bettolo, *Congettura intorno a un'assenza*, p. 161-162.

³⁵⁶ Mar Yozadaq who declared himself disciple of Isaac of Niniveh.

was the disciple and biographer of Joseph Hazzaya, the third author condemned in the council. Therefore, at least hypothetically, one can advance the idea that Isaac was not foreign to this theological direction. If we recall the idea expressed by Vittorio Berti, the East Syriac Church knew in its monasteries and schools “divergences regarding the conception of union with God and, in consequence, divergences on the Christian life, in general”, generated by the contact between two different conceptions regarding spiritual life – one more mystical, and the other more institutional³⁵⁷. Hence, one speaks about a Christological perspective that allows an experiential theology. Isaac himself was a significant name in this polemical meeting.

2.5 Conclusion

The general obvious conclusion one can draw after this short analysis refers to the fact that in the East Syriac Church between the 7th and 8th century there was no unitary Christological doctrine. One can speak either about parties or, probably, more exact, about different perspective within the parties. If Alberto Camplani’s thesis is to be recalled, one might speak about two or three parties – the theological, the ecclesiastical and monastic authority, represented by theologians, clerics, respectively monks.

To step forward, the goal of monastic spirituality was radically different from the intellectual practices. In this frame, the ascetics manifested an antinomian attitude, by an experiential theology that gives space to a direct contact with the divinity, at the level of the mind and heart. To justify their perspective many times they advocated a balanced and conciliatory position, or, maybe, sometimes, reformatory attitudes, especially in terms of Christology, and so they didn’t always place themselves in the line of their Church theological tradition. This ecumenical position was seldom assimilated as Messalian by the representatives of the “philosophical”³⁵⁸ party of their Church community.

Speaking about Isaac of Niniveh, to recall the phraseology of Michael Morony, he “was an important transition figure, coordinating nearly the entire set of ideas associated with love of mysticism”³⁵⁹. The same author adds other two names next to Isaac’s name– Jacob Hazzaya and Joseph Hazzaya – in order to advocate the idea that a group of ascetics shifted the emphasis from ascetic mysticism, propelled by fear and induced by extreme forms of self-denial, to an ecstatic mysticism, based on the love of God. Thus, he adopted a conciliatory

³⁵⁷ Cf. *Vita e studi di Timoteo I*, p. 157-166.

³⁵⁸ Cf. “The Culmination of Monastic Ideology: Isaac of Niniveh”, in A. H. Becker, *Fear of God and the Beginning of Wisdom. The School of Nisibis and the Development of Scholastic Culture in Late Antique Mesopotamia*, University of Pennsylvania Press, Philadelphia, 2006, p. 184-188 (here p. 187-188).

³⁵⁹ Michael Morony, *Iraq after the Muslim Conquest*, p. 464.

position, while advising believers to abandon all literature that could divide Christians³⁶⁰ and expressing his mystical theology in a language that avoids any polemic discussions. It is not about a simple quietism, so that to detach from the current evangelism, theological disputes and state intervention, but about liberation of the spirit from temporal authority³⁶¹. He takes upon an “ecumenical mysticism”³⁶² which has as direct consequence a type of patronizing toleration³⁶³.

In consequence, his theology, and, in particular, his Christology is framed on the basis of his mystical position. When he adopts a conciliatory perspective in matters of Christology, he does not want to enter into theological disputes, but to justify his experiential vision. Therefore, he uses a courageous vocabulary in terms of spirituality, such as knowing God, feeling God, or even the problematic theme – seeing God, aspects that we are going to deal with in the next chapters. His perspective is not an isolated phenomenon as we have seen so far. From this point of view, he might be called a mystic more than a theologian. His radical anchoritism and implicit antinomianism made his influence be exceptional and fitted within the Church of his time and not only³⁶⁴.

After this historical analysis of the theological problems of his time, we will continue the research by going straight to very core of the topic, the process of divine knowledge, developed within the pedagogical-historical vision of Theodore of Mopsuestia.

³⁶⁰ Cf. Philip Wood, *The Chronicle of Seert. Christian Historical Imagination in Late Antique Iraq*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2013, p. 162.

³⁶¹ Michael Morony, *Iraq after the Muslim Conquest*, p. 450.

³⁶² Michael Morony, *Iraq after the Muslim Conquest*, p. 380.

³⁶³ “Deem all people worthy of bounty and honour, be they Jews or miscreants or murderers” (I, 4, p. 39)

³⁶⁴ A. H. Becker, *The Culmination of Monastic Ideology*, p. 188.

3. The history of divine Economy from Creation to eschatological time. Incarnation as foundational event for divine knowledge

3.1 General aspects

From a theological point of view, divine knowledge depends on God's revelation, on one side, and on human's capacity to have access to it, on the other side. To put it differently, this process is conditioned by what we technically call divine Economy and theological anthropology. This is the general frame within which Isaac builds and develops his doctrine on knowledge. Therefore, before entering into the very core of the theme, one needs to dwell on these two chapters, by trying to identify Isaac's perspective and his sources on which he builds a specific vision.

The first observation to mention refers to the general historical framework of Isaac's discourse. We refer here to Theodore of Mopsuestia's historical-linear soteriology, developed in two stages / *catastasis*³⁶⁵ – the earthly period, subjected to mortality, corruption, passibility and mutability, and the future state or the life to come, characterised by immortality, incorruptibility, impassivity and immutability³⁶⁶. According to Theodore, the second state has been already inaugurated by Christ's incarnation, who broke the history of humanity into two different qualitative periods.

For Theodore of Mopsuestia salvation is a slow educational process designed by God even before creation and undisturbed by the events that followed the originary fall. Specifically, he sees salvation as a progress from the state of imperfection to perfection by the experience of opposites: human was not created perfect from the beginning, although destined for that, because he was not able to appreciate this gift. He was not able to know good by nature as God, but by its opposite. From this perspective, God acts pedagogically, by educating human through the experience of the opposite things, so that to freely receive his gifts and revelations. Death is not the result of the originary sin, but the natural condition of

³⁶⁵ ܡܥܬܐܬܐ; Cf. Paolo Bettio, "Introduzione", Isacco di Ninive, *Discorsi spirituali e altri opuscoli*, Qiqajon, Bose, 1990, p. 36; Mary Hansbury, " 'Insight without sight': Wonder as an aspect of revelation in the discourses of Isaac the Syrian", in *Journal of the Canadian Society for Syriac Studies*, 8 (2008), p. 60-73 (here 67).

³⁶⁶ Robert Macina advocates the hypothesis that the division of history into two periods in Theodore's perspective is a positive response, in a linear and progressive sense, against the two Origenist stages of creation (Cf. Robert Macina, "L'homme à l'école de Dieu. D'Antioche à Nisibis", *Proche Orient Chrétien*, 39 (1981), p. 112; 33 (1982), p. 45.) According to Antoine Guillaumont, this is a good example to sustain the Syriac paradox of being simultaneously anti-Origenists and pro-Evagrians (Cf. Ioan I. Ică jr., "Sfântul Isaac Sirul necunoscutul – operă, profil istoric și gândire spirituală pe fundalul tradiției siro-orientale", in Sfântul Isaac Sirul, *Cuvinte către singuratici. Partea a doua recent descoperită*, Sibiu, Deisis, 2004, footnote 92, p. 62).

human with the clear role to plant in him hatred against sin, belonging to the state of the created world³⁶⁷.

After the fall, human's knowledge becomes more vicious. So as human not to wander ceaselessly and enter into despair, God intervenes in the history by means of ambassadors and elected people, through angels and prophets, and, finally, through the Incarnation of his Son. By an active sacramental life, human may participate in the incarnation and resurrection of Christ, which represents the anticipation of the after death life, by means of the Holy Spirit. In this framework, Incarnation has a deep revelational role, being the ultimate event where God reveals Himself to the world as he is, anticipating the eschatological state he had prepared even before bringing creation into existence³⁶⁸.

From this perspective, the soteriological process is interpreted as a gnoseological evolution regarding revelation. In this context, human journeys from infantile knowledge, pertaining to the first stage of existence, progressing towards deeper knowledge, and culminating, in the earthly world, with the event of the Incarnation, when God reveals himself to creation.

In this chapter we will focus on three main aspects, as implied in Isaac's theology – the revelation of God in creation, his anthropological system and the process of incarnation, as anticipation of the eschatological knowledge.

3.2 God's revelation in creation and the divine knowledge

Isaac of Niniveh has no doubt arguing that God brings the world into existence from nothing by means of his love, so as to enter into dialogue with it and to reveal himself to it. In the Second collection he clearly stresses this idea: “you fashioned me in your will from the beginning, so that I may behold your eternal glory. For it is you who, even before we came into being, wished in your love that creation should come into being so as to become aware³⁶⁹ of you”³⁷⁰. The direct source of his vision is Theodore of Mopsuestia, who explicitly quotes: “Quant'è bello e desiderabile riportare alla memoria la parola detta da qualche parte del beato

³⁶⁷ Technically, this type of knowledge is called “creatural knowledge”. For the connection between Isaac's anthropology and the Theodorian perspective see Nestor Kavvadas, “Some observations on the theological anthropology of Isaac of Niniveh and its sources”, in *Scrinium IV* (2008), p. 147-157.

³⁶⁸ For more details see José Maria Lera, “Théodore de Mopsuestia”, *Dictionnaire de Spiritualité XV*, 1991, col. 386-399; Robert Beulay, *La lumière sans forme. Introduction à l'étude de la mystique chrétienne syro-orientale*, p. 184-198.

³⁶⁹ *ܐܝܢܐ*.

³⁷⁰ I, 4, p. 30. The term employed here goes on the line with Macarius' terminology of “feeling”.

Interprete: *È dunque chiaro che Dio è giunto alla costituzione della creazione (mosso) da grande bontà e profonda carità*”³⁷¹.

In fact, divine love is the very fundament for divine creation and Economy as well³⁷² and the only key reading for human’s destiny. Creation – governance – eschatological fulfillment are the three chapters to describe Isaac’s linear history, within which he builds his gnoseological vision.

We will quote another fragment where Isaac takes further this idea, specifically referring to human’s creation, arguing that he was brought into being in order “to know” God and to partake “divine glory”, referential terms for our debate. In the Second collection we read that “the soul was created by its fashioner for no other purpose except only so that it might take delight in knowledge of the divine glory³⁷³... to draw near the knowledge of the of that glorious nature^{374,,375}. As we have seen in the previous chapter, seeing the divine glory represents a common way of expressing mystical life in the East Syriac monastic writers, occasionally accepted even by Catholikos Timothy I and the radical conservative party³⁷⁶. With almost an academic precision, specific more to the 14th century theology, during Gregory Palamas’ time, Isaac employs a technical language, so as to safeguard God’s transcendence as well as his immanence: “As a result of the practical discovery of the things that belong to him a person is raised up in his thoughts to the contemplation of Him: this constitutes the true vision³⁷⁷ of Him, not of His nature³⁷⁸, but to the dark cloud of His glory”³⁷⁹.

After mentioning the central idea of this subchapter, we will go further trying to detail it within the frame of the two Theodorian catastases³⁸⁰. According to the biblical recite speaking about creation means referring to two worlds: the invisible one, of the intangible spirits, and

³⁷¹ II, 3.3,70 (unidentified quotation).

³⁷² II, 38,2.

³⁷³ ܐܠܗܐ ܕܡܢܐܝܐ ܕܡܢܐܝܐ.

³⁷⁴ ܡܢܐܝܐ ܕܡܢܐܝܐ ܕܡܢܐܝܐ ܕܡܢܐܝܐ.

³⁷⁵ II, 2, p. 31.

³⁷⁶ This theme will be later on part of the language used by hesychasts in the Byzantine theology. God is invisible in his being, but he reveals himself in his energies or works, by means of grace, granting human to participate to his glory. This is the fundament for the doctrine of deification which describes the process of salvation in the Byzantine tradition.

³⁷⁷ ܐܠܗܐ ܕܡܢܐܝܐ ; See also I, 4, 36, p. 183; II, 14,29.

³⁷⁸ ܡܢܐܝܐ.

³⁷⁹ ܡܢܐܝܐ ܕܡܢܐܝܐ ; II, 10,17; See also II, 10,24, based on Exodus 20:21, derived from Ps. Dionysius, rather than from Gregory of Nyssa, who does not seem to have been translated into Syriac in Isaac’s time (cf. M. Parmentier, “Syriac Translation of Gregory of Nyssa”, *OLP* 20 (1989), p. 149-193, here 173).

³⁸⁰ ܕܡܢܐܝܐ ܕܡܢܐܝܐ.

the visible one, the material world. The angels and demons belong to the former, while to the latter the material universe, including human.

Regarding the invisible world, Isaac is tributary to Pseudo Dionysius³⁸¹ when he divides angels³⁸² (created “out of nothing all of the sudden”³⁸³) in nine hosts and three triads³⁸⁴, depending on their service and the degree of knowledge of their Creator. We will emphasize some of their features:

- they are created in God’s image³⁸⁵;
- their mission is to glorify God without cease³⁸⁶;
- the hosts represent different degrees of intimacy with God (at gnosiological level), which means that the outer hosts do not see those which are closer, but can see each other; but they cannot see “the cause of all”³⁸⁷. One speaks in this case of a top-down knowledge³⁸⁸.
- the difference between hosts is not due to the place they occupy, but rather it comes from “their inner movements/ emotions”; their knowledge does not come from “their external distinctions”, as in the case of the bodily beings, but “out of the extent of the emotions”³⁸⁹;
- angels are also subject to change, transformation, but only in good. Growth is related to their “intelligence”³⁹⁰ in the sense that each intelligence mysteriously receives its growth from other intelligences, not as in human’s case from body to body³⁹¹.

The angels play a crucial role in the revelation of God in the world. According to Isaac’s vision, the primary function of angels is “the mediation”³⁹² of divine revelations³⁹³.

³⁸¹ *On the Celestial Hierarchy*, PG 3, 120 B-340B. Emiliano Fiori argues that Isaac did not really make a lecture of the Dionysian writings, but the angels’ hierarchy was a common tradition of his Church, present in more anthological sources which used to be read in his time (for details see Emiliano Fiori, “Dionysius the Areopagite and Isaac: An Attempt at Reassessment”, in *Proceedings of the First International Conference: “Saint Isaac the Syrian and His Spiritual Legacy”, October 10-11, 2013, Moscow*,/ Ss. Cyril and Methodius Theological Institute for Postgraduate Studies, Moscow, 2014, p. 288-304).

³⁸² ܐܠܗܐ.

³⁸³ II, 10.24.

³⁸⁴ I, 25, p. 126-127.

³⁸⁵ II, 20,8.

³⁸⁶ II, 12,1.

³⁸⁷ ܠܗܐ ܐܠܗܐ.

³⁸⁸ II, 3.2,69.

³⁸⁹ ܐܠܗܐ ܐܠܗܐ ; I, 25, p. 124 (B, p. 183).

³⁹⁰ ܐܠܗܐ.

³⁹¹ II, 3.2,71.

³⁹² ܐܠܗܐ ܐܠܗܐ ; I, 28, p. 254-255; See also Hilaryon Alfeyev, *The Spiritual World of Isaac the Syrian*, Kalamazoo, Michigan, Cistercian Publications, 2000, p. 227-232.

³⁹³ I, 72, p. 334 (B, 497).

Mediated knowledge of angels remains valid only for earthly life, as in the after death life there will be a direct one.

Regarding demons³⁹⁴, Isaac ranks them into three orders within the same chapter 25 of the First collection. They can see each other within the same host, but never the higher host, due to their impurity, because “spiritual sight³⁹⁵ is serenity³⁹⁶ of impulses. The impulses are their mirror³⁹⁷ and their eyes³⁹⁸. When they become darkened they do not see the orders that are above them”³⁹⁹.

We will continue with God’s revelation in the visible world. Isaac claims that God creates eight intelligible natures⁴⁰⁰, the first seven – the angels – in silence⁴⁰¹ and the eighth one – the light – by voice⁴⁰². Both Professor Paolo Bettolo and Brother André Louf argue that Isaac’s position goes along the exegetical East Syriac tradition, which reflects a specific and original reading of the Bible⁴⁰³. We are dealing with a theory on the creation of light in stages. In this respect, chapters 6 and 7 of the second centuria on knowledge are illustrative. There, the bishop of Niniveh speaks of the “first light”⁴⁰⁴ which clothed the Incarnate Word and was proclaimed by the sensitive light⁴⁰⁵. This light darkened⁴⁰⁶ the light of human, “his second brothers”, and continued to be praised and contemplated by the angels. The same light will be the brightful dress of Christ at the Second Coming. This text is rather obscure and seems not to provide a clear perspective on the nature of primordial light and how, once being put on by the Incarnate Word, darkened the light of human. Based on the East Syriac exegetical tradition, Paolo Bettolo’s opinion is that this primordial light is created, because it is assimilated to the body of the resurrected Christ, and later on, the same human body borrowed

³⁹⁴ ܠܕܝܢܝܐ.

³⁹⁵ ܡܢܝܢ ܠܝܢܝܐ.

³⁹⁶ ܠܕܝܢܝܐ.

³⁹⁷ ܠܕܝܢܝܐ.

³⁹⁸ ܠܕܝܢܝܐ.

³⁹⁹ I, 26, p. 241 (B, 184).

⁴⁰⁰ ܠܕܝܢܝܐ.

⁴⁰¹ ܠܕܝܢܝܐ.

⁴⁰² ܠܕܝܢܝܐ.

⁴⁰³ In his argumentation, Prof. Bettolo quotes in his article “*Avec la charité comme but: Dieu et création dans la méditation d’Isaac de Ninive*” (*Irénikon*, 63, 1990, 3, p. 327), a fragment from the letter of Catholikos George, who ordained Isaac bishop of Niniveh: “Pendant de l’espace de douze heures les natures spirituelles demeurèrent dans les ténèbres, ainsi que toutes les natures qui fuit créées. Pour l’instruction des anges, notre Dieu bon dit: ‘Que la lumière soit’, et aussitôt, en même temps que cette parole, la nature admirable de la lumière exista, et les natures spirituelles furent dans l’admiration, et furent excitées à la louange du créateur de la lumière. Comme Dieu lui-même l’apprend au juste job en disant: ‘Quand je créai les étoiles du firmament, toutes les anges s’exclamèrent et me louèrent’ ” (cf. J.B. Chabot, SO, p. 227-245, here p. 230; p. 490-514, here p. 494).

⁴⁰⁴ ܠܕܝܢܝܐ.

⁴⁰⁵ ܠܕܝܢܝܐ.

⁴⁰⁶ ܠܕܝܢܝܐ.

by the resurrected people in eschaton. On the same line, some other scholars suggest an interpretation to the phrase “darkened the light of men” in a Christological key – the incarnated Christ becomes the epiphany (we will see below that the term used for incarnation follows the same theme of light⁴⁰⁷) of the Sun of justice, which goes beyond any other form of sensitive light⁴⁰⁸. One can speak here about an apophatic phraseology in the East Syriac variant. The light realises the contact between the creation of the invisible and the visible world.

Isaac interprets the visible world as “the first book⁴⁰⁹ given by God to the rational beings. Written teachings have been added only after human’s falling”⁴¹⁰. Scripture itself seems to help especially those who are not able to spiritually understand the mysteries of God’s creation. Interesting and useful for our analysis is a fragment that Ibn as-Salt attributes to Isaac, while arguing the mediation role of nature for the divine knowledge: “All things were created to proclaim the glory of God and to sing his praise: intelligible beings were created to know God, and the unintelligible to make him known”⁴¹¹.

⁴⁰⁷ ܠܡܢܐ.

⁴⁰⁸ Cf. Paolo Bettolo, footnote 1 in Isacco di Ninive, *Discorsi spirituali e altri opuscoli*, p. 116-117. In the same frame, the author mentions two other representative names for the East Syriac tradition on the idea of the creation of light in two stages. These are: Isho’dad de Merw, in his commentary to the book of Genesis (CSCO, vol. 156, Louvain, 1955, p. 15-22), where he speaks about the creation of spiritual beings in silence and of the light by voice; and Teodor bar Koni, *Libro degli scolii* (CSCO, vol. 431, Louvain, 1981, p. 67-68), attributed to Theodore of Mopsuestia. The author identifies some other four theses beyond those quoted by the first author mentioned above. These are: the voice and the light invites angels to praising „the first light” of God (p. 18); the original light has no shade, similar to that which precedes the time of sunrise and sunset (p. 22-23); around the light of the fourth day of creation, God divides the original diffused light in three: the sun, the moon and the stars (p. 37); the diffused light characterises human bodies after the resurrection, as the body of Christ. It therefore remains a created light as it arises from Christ’s humanity (*Commentary to Exodus 13,21*, CSCO, Vol. 179, Louvain, 1958, p. 34, I.31-35, I.19; *Commentary to 1 Cor. 15,35-53*, CSCO, vol 432, Louvain, 1982, p. 160-162). This might be a major difference between the Byzantine Chalcedonian doctrine and the East Syriac one. The former one bases its soteriological doctrine (deification) on the uncreated character of divine light, who, by participation, accomplishes the process of human’s adoption, while the created character of the latter one pertains more to the western Catholic doctrine, diminishing the communication between humans and God. The uncreated light will be the central theme of the hesycast disputes (see at large John Meyendorff, *St Grégoire Palamas et la mystique orthodoxe*, Paris, 1959; Antonio Rigo, “De l’apologie à l’évocation de l’expérience mystique. Evagre le Pontique, Isaac le Syrien et Diadoque de Photicé dans les œuvres de Grégoire de Palamas (et dans la controverse palamite)”, *Miscellanea Medievalia. Knotenpunkt Byzanz*, 36 (2012), p. 85-108; George Maloney, S.J., *A Theology of Uncreated Energies*, Milwaukee, WI, Marquette, University Press, 1978).

⁴⁰⁹ ܠܡܢܐ ܕܡܢܐ.

⁴¹⁰ I, 5, p. 42 (B, 61). By this methaphor, Isaac is tributary to the East Syriac tradition, in the line of Ephrem the Syrian, called “the saint of ecology” (cf. Mark Mourachian, „Hymns Against Heresies: Comments on St. Ephrem the Syrian”, *Sophia* 37 (2007) 2, p. 30-31).

⁴¹¹ Paul Sbath, *Traité religieux, philosophiques et moraux, extraits des œuvres d’Isaac ee Ninive (VIIe siècle)*, par Ibn as-Salt (IXe siècle), Le Cair, 1934, p. 70-78, 108-110.

3.3 Human and his ability to know God. Elements of anthropology

The next step in our research aims to synthetically analyse Isaac's anthropology in correspondence with protology. More specifically, we will refer to the event of creation of human and the place it occupies in relation to God – intelligible beings – the visible world.

In his perspective, the ability to know God is due to the fact that human himself is created in God's image. Speaking about the structure of the human being – body⁴¹², soul⁴¹³, spirit⁴¹⁴ – Isaac is tributary to the philosophical and patristic Greek anthropology. Then speaking about the three faculties of the soul⁴¹⁵: concupiscence⁴¹⁶ will/ irascibility⁴¹⁷ and reason⁴¹⁸, the same heritage is betrayed. Isaac borrows this system from Platonic anthropology⁴¹⁹ or from Evagrius⁴²⁰, respectively John the Solitary⁴²¹, as it is common to all three authors⁴²².

To better understand the structural relationship between the corporeal and the spiritual in the anthropological system of the bishop of Nineveh and its role in the process of knowing God we will make a brief comparative analysis of Isaac's three mentors' theological perspective, as present in his discourses. For this endeavour, we will use the synthesis Patrick Hagman did in his doctoral dissertation, which was devoted to Isaac's ascetic doctrine⁴²³. Regarding Theodore of Mopsuestia, soul and body are two different natures, but human consists of both⁴²⁴. He argues that the soul has the ability to exist in itself, without the body, it is a hypostatic nature, and yet this is not its ultimate destiny. He asserts the idea that the soul has a substance based on the doctrine of its immortality. Advocating this theory, he makes a synthesis between Platonism, Aristotelian philosophy and stoicism. Bipartite division reflects the two catastases of creation⁴²⁵. In this framework, reason is an ethical ability, which means

⁴¹² ܚܝܬܐ.

⁴¹³ ܠܡܫܚܐ.

⁴¹⁴ ܠܡܫܚܐ.

⁴¹⁵ II, 17.1.

⁴¹⁶ ܠܡܫܚܐ.

⁴¹⁷ ܠܡܫܚܐ.

⁴¹⁸ ܠܡܫܚܐ.

⁴¹⁹ Τὸ λογιστικόν, τὸ θυμοειδές, τὸ ἐπιθυμητικόν (Plato, *Republica*, IV.14).

⁴²⁰ *Gnostikos*, §14, *Praktikos* §22; §89, SC 170-171.

⁴²¹ *Dialogue sur l'âme e les passions des hommes* 13-4, *Orientalia Christiana Analecta*, Roma, 1939, p. 26.

⁴²² The first term (the rational part – ܠܡܫܚܐ ܠܡܫܚܐ) – τὸ λογιστικόν – is regularly associated to ܠܡܫܚܐ or ܠܡܫܚܐ; ܠܡܫܚܐ with Evagrian ܠܡܫܚܐ ܠܡܫܚܐ (KG 1.25); the second one (irascible part – ܠܡܫܚܐ ܠܡܫܚܐ) – τὸ θυμοειδές – with ܠܡܫܚܐ; and the third faculty (sentimental part – ܠܡܫܚܐ ܠܡܫܚܐ) – τὸ ἐπιθυμητικόν – with ܠܡܫܚܐ; for details see Sebastian Brock, footnote 2 at II, 17,1, p. 91.

⁴²³ Patrick Hagman, *The Ascetism of Isaac of Nineveh*, p. 56-63.

⁴²⁴ For details see R. A. Norris jr., *Manhood and Christ: A Study in the Christology of Theodore of Mopsuestia*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1963, p. 127-132.

⁴²⁵ Cf. R.A. Norris Jr., *Manhood and Christ*, p. 143.

that it guides human to take moral decisions, and its completion is evidenced by the ability to discern right from wrong. Theodore attaches great importance to the freedom of choice and in consequence, the responsibility of one's actions. The connection of the three elements (reason, freedom and responsibility) advocates the idea that human needs to be educated to acquire moral behaviour. Although acting morally is inherently to the rational soul, it needs to be supported as it is subject to mutability. Regarding sin, Theodore considers that bodily nature is the one responsible for it, particularly because of corruption and death that characterize it, but, at the same time, he insists that sin is an act of freedom of choice that pertains to the soul. Despite the fact the body has attraction towards sin, the soul is the forum that actually chooses. His vision closely resembles the dichotomous Pauline structure body – spirit, and salvation does not mean separation from the body (as in Platonism), but the transformation of the body, so as not to be subject to death anymore. This is human's destiny and purpose, and the whole of creation.

Speaking of Evagrius, Michael O'Laughlin argues that he significantly departed from his master Origen⁴²⁶. The latter one taught a hierarchy of σῶμα, σὰρξ and ψυχή, of which νοῦς is the highest part, and πνεῦμα. The soul is the centre of human personality, while the body and the spirit influence it in opposing directions⁴²⁷. A very important aspect is connected to the origin of the spirit – it does not belong to the human structure, it is sent by God to guide him. And yet, he considers it as part of the soul, this is why he does not support the thrichotomic structure. Before the fall, one speaks about pure *nous*, but after this event it became cool and expanded into an external soul, like an addition, where the *nous* is encased. Soul and body are part of a second creation, while the *nous* of the first. On the Platonic line, the soul comprises three faculties: the rational⁴²⁸, irascible⁴²⁹ and concupiscible⁴³⁰. The last two functions form the soul's passionate part, and have a relatively negative dimension expressed in the *nous*' distractions from its spiritual progression. To summarize, we will say that Evagrius theorizes a tripartite anthropological vision – the *nous*, the centre of human, which tends to God, the soul and body, which are neutral in themselves and yet tend to distract the *nous* from God⁴³¹.

⁴²⁶ “The Anthropology of Evagrius Ponticus and its Sources”, in Charles Kannengiesser and William L. Petersen (eds.), *Origen of Alexandria. His World and His Legacy*, Christianity and Judaism in Antiquity, University of Notre Dame Press, 1988, p. 357-373 (here p. 357).

⁴²⁷ Michael O'Laughlin, “The Anthropology of Evagrius Ponticus”, p. 359.

⁴²⁸ λογιστικός.

⁴²⁹ θύμος.

⁴³⁰ ἐπιθυμία.

⁴³¹ Cf. Patrick Hagman, *The Ascetism of Isaac of Niniveh*, p. 60; See Isaac II, 17,1. The same perspective can be found in John the Solitary. Therefore, it is difficult to trace Isaac's source while developing this idea.

For John the Solitary, the soul is the centre joined to the body⁴³². While talking about the triad body – soul – spirit, the Syriac mystic does not support the existence of the spirit in human, but rather speaks of spiritual people and spiritual imitators. The soul distinguishes human from other creatures and its connection to the body affects it considerably⁴³³. The body–mind connection makes the latter component think through images⁴³⁴. Both body and soul reflect and participate to God’s glory. The human is not able to participate to the invisible reality except with the body; this is why the Creator put the soul in it. On the same line, despite the tripartite spiritual itinerary advocated by John, Patrick Hagman claims that the Solitary (and, in consequence, Isaac) expresses a dichotomical anthropology – body and soul – while the spirit is the innermost part of the soul, meaning not separated from the latter one⁴³⁵. One important detail in this discussion is related to the language used by John the Solitary to naming the body: *ܕܢܝܚܐ* and *ܕܒܪܐܐ*. The author mentioned above argues that the Solitary in his works seems to make a distinction between the use of the two terms, the second refers more to the physical body, the “place” of “pagro”, while the first one has a rather symbolical dimension⁴³⁶. But he is not really systematic in stressing this nuance. However, it cannot be identified in Isaac’s anthropology⁴³⁷.

Synthetizing the visions of the three authors mentioned above, one can say about Theodore that he expresses a tensionate relation between the body and the soul, Evagrius’ anthropology puts the *nous* above body and soul and in a continual tension, while the Solitary insists on the fact that both the body and the soul reflect God’s glory and greatness.

In developing his anthropological vision, Isaac makes a synthesis of these different perspectives. As the thesis will detail below, the body is an instrument which is subjected to the soul, and has no negative connotations in itself. The body is absolutely necessary in the ascetic labours, but it might get a negative meaning when interpreted as a factor of distraction from God and an impediment to human’s spiritual progression, getting the sense of the symbol for the self that the soul and the mind have no complete control over. The identified

⁴³² Sven Dederling, *Johannes von Lycopolis: Ein Dialog über die Seele und die Affekte des Menschen*, Uppsala: Arbeten utgiva med understöd av Vilhelm Ekmans universitetsfond, 1936, p. 47; Werner Strothmann, *Johannes von Apamea*, *Patristische und Studien*, 11, Berlin, Walter de Gruyter, 1972, p. 120.

⁴³³ Sven Dederling, *Johannes von Lycopolis*, p. 3.

⁴³⁴ Werner Strothmann, *Johannes von Apamea*, p. 121.

⁴³⁵ Patrick Hagman, *The Ascetism of Isaac of Niniveh*, p. 61.

⁴³⁶ Patrick Hagman, *The Ascetism of Isaac of Niniveh*, p. 62.

⁴³⁷ See for instance I, 37, p. 288, where Isaac uses the two terms referring to the physical body.

solution refers to the spiritualisation or transfiguration of the body, so as to become transparent to God⁴³⁸.

When it comes to the three functions performed by the noetic faculty, Isaac departs from John the Solitary and faithfully follows Evagrius's perspective. The language he uses is typical Evagrian. We will refer mainly to II 19, 1-7, where Isaac synthetically develops this issue. He speaks about three powers⁴³⁹/ parts⁴⁴⁰ – desire⁴⁴¹, zeal⁴⁴² and reason⁴⁴³. To the first part he assigns “the yearning”⁴⁴⁴, “the incitement of all that is beautiful”⁴⁴⁵. This power, in his view, is specific to the rational nature⁴⁴⁶. To the second power, he assigns “alertness”⁴⁴⁷ and “diligence”⁴⁴⁸, along with “perseverance”⁴⁴⁹ in the face of afflictions. To these he adds a “strong disposition”⁴⁵⁰, “a courage and valour of heart”⁴⁵¹ as well as “fortitude” against all it causes harm and fright⁴⁵². And to the third power (reason) he ascribes four other virtues – “the heart's luminous faith”⁴⁵³, “free control of the emotions”⁴⁵⁴, “hope and unceasing musing”⁴⁵⁵ on divine wisdom. These three powers are classified into two categories: the first two are the active and the latter is called “divine contemplation”⁴⁵⁶, reckoned as the good use of the “intelligible portion”⁴⁵⁷, that is the mind. It is also important to note that the first two powers are assimilated to the bodily virtues, while the third one is associated with the contemplative work⁴⁵⁸, the quality of reason, which brings the mind close to peering the mysteries of God, to

⁴³⁸ See the salvific role of the body, in the line of Theodore; it is the topos of God's presence (the image and likeness).

⁴³⁹ ԺԼԹ.

⁴⁴⁰ ԴԺԽԹ.

⁴⁴¹ ԴԺԽԽԻ.

⁴⁴² ԴԽԺԻ.

⁴⁴³ ԴԺԽԽԽԽԽ.

⁴⁴⁴ ԴԺԽԽԽԽԽ .

⁴⁴⁵ ԴԽ ԻԽԽ .

⁴⁴⁶ ԴԽԽԽ ԴԽԽ.

⁴⁴⁷ ԴԺԽԽԽԽ .

⁴⁴⁸ ԴԺԽԽԽԽԽ .

⁴⁴⁹ ԴԺԽԽԽԽԽ ԴԽԽԽԽԽԽԽ.

⁴⁵⁰ ԴԽԽԽ ԴԽԽԽ.

⁴⁵¹ ԴԽԽԽ ԴԽԽԽԽԽԽ և ԴԽԽԽԽԽԽ.

⁴⁵² ԴԽԽԽԽԽԽ.

⁴⁵³ ԴԽԽԽ ԴԽԽԽԽԽԽ ԴԽԽԽԽ.

⁴⁵⁴ ԴԽԽԽ ԴԽԽԽԽԽԽ.

⁴⁵⁵ ԴԽԽԽԽԽ ԴԽԽԽ.

⁴⁵⁶ ԴԽԽԽԽԽ ԴԽԽԽԽԽ. Apparently it seems to be Evagrian (KG. IV.48), but it also appears in the *Historia Lausiaca*, in Dionysius, Sergius, Babai the Great or Gregory of Cyprus. For details see footnote 5, II, 18,3, p. 104.

⁴⁵⁷ ԴԽԽԽԽԽԽԽ ԴԽԽԽ.

⁴⁵⁸ ԴԽԽԽԽԽԽԽ.

reaching “the complete mingling with God”⁴⁵⁹. It is at this first stage that one achieves divine knowledge.

In another context, describing the powers of the soul⁴⁶⁰, Isaac of Niniveh, classifies them into five categories:

- natural desire (ܐܝܬܐ ܕܚܝܬܐ);
- irascible power (ܩܠܒܐ ܕܥܝܪܥܝܬܐ);
- vitality (ܩܠܒܐ ܕܚܝܬܐ ܕܥܝܪܥܝܬܐ);
- simple rationality (ܩܠܒܐ ܕܥܝܪܥܝܬܐ ܕܚܝܬܐ);
- composed rationality (ܩܠܒܐ ܕܥܝܪܥܝܬܐ ܕܚܝܬܐ)⁴⁶¹.

Not all of them have the same duration. Some are related to the earthly existence, others go beyond, into the after death life. Specifically, Isaac argues that two of them (irascibility and composed rationality) end their existence in the moment of death. In order to support this idea he uses an argument borrowed from the common teaching on the life to come – after death there is nothing to be transmitted by voice, and, similarly, as there will be no opposition from what is good, there is no need anymore for zeal. The third power (vitality) is the only one that remains active during the separation between the body and the soul, and justifies its existence so as to receive either joy or suffering from both body and soul, together, in the next life. And the other two (simple rationality and natural desire) will be the powers necessary for heavenly life – the first one for knowing God by means of contemplation, while the latter one for loving God. We will quote a short fragment where Isaac advocates the role of these two powers of the soul: “la razionalità semplice, che è l’intelletto gnostico⁴⁶² in cui (l’anima) è mossa nella contemplazione di quell’Essenza che è tutto il fine del regno dei cieli... il desiderio della sua natura, da cui è mosso il piacere per la grande carità del Creatore...”⁴⁶³.

Angels already live by these powers and people will be part of this mystery after resurrection. However, as we will see later, Incarnation already inaugurates the post-resurrection heavenly life, actualised in the sacramental spiritual life. From this perspective, in the state of spiritual knowledge, human becomes similar to angels and can experience the

⁴⁵⁹ ܩܠܒܐ ܕܚܝܬܐ ܕܥܝܪܥܝܬܐ ; II, 19.6.

⁴⁶⁰ ܩܠܒܐ ܕܥܝܪܥܝܬܐ.

⁴⁶¹ II, 3.3, 76-77.

⁴⁶² ܩܠܒܐ ܕܥܝܪܥܝܬܐ.

⁴⁶³ II, 3.3, 77. Catholikos Timothy I speaks too about five powers, but he describes their role differently: two of them are of the soul – rationality and will, other two of the soul by the union with the body – concupiscence and irascibility, and vitality. The first couple is active while the body is alive, but appears again after resurrection; the second couple remains as much as the human lives, after it disappears; only the vitality is always active. For details see Vittorio Berti, “Le débat sur la vision de Dieu et la condamnation des mystiques par Timothée I^{er}: la perspective du patriarche”, in *Études Syriaque* 8, *Les mystiques syriaques*, p. 151-176.

stupor accompanied by silence, as forms of life in the kingdom of heaven, even during earthly life. Then the mind receives the ability of contemplating⁴⁶⁴ the Prototype⁴⁶⁵.

This possibility of “knowing” and “feeling” God, reflected in Isaac’s anthropology, illustrated above, is due to the human’s divine image, located into the noetic part of the soul. It is evident that this time Isaac is tributary to Evagrius and not to Theodore of Mopsuestia, who identifies the image of God in human at the representative level. According to the latter one’s vision, human is created to represent God in creation, to be a true king of the visible, as the statue of the emperor in the Roman cities represents the king himself⁴⁶⁶.

One can intuit that Isaac makes a synthesis between the two authors belonging to two different schools (the Antiochene and Alexandrian), borrowing the soteriological schema of Theodore and the ontology of the intellect specific to Evagrius, but omitting his theory of the intellects’ initial fall, the history of Being, as well as the ontological-anthropological Theodorian position. Thus, Isaac suppresses two holistic closed systems, uniting them in his own synthesis – from Theodore the salvation history as anthropology “from down to up” and from Evagrius his ontology as anthropology “from up to down”⁴⁶⁷.

In the Syriac tradition, the image of God in human was often compared with a metal mirror⁴⁶⁸. In order to accurately reflect the reality, it needs to be constantly polished and cleaned. The image of God in human was connected with the history of salvation, which is conducted in stages – at the beginning the mirror was clean and functioned as such; after the fall, the mirror gets filled with rust; in the incarnation, the situation is remedied in potency, since Christ is the prototype image or the mirror that perfectly reflects the Father; in consequence, by asceticism and sacraments it becomes possible for human to clean the image /mirror, requiring a free will⁴⁶⁹.

In the same frame, one can add that the world (material creation) was originally a mirror of God and the human could read in it the divine presence as in a book. He used to rule and humanize it. It was transparent to God. The fall meant a fundamental change to the world as well (Romans 8:29), it became less transparent and more and more foreign to human, even a hostile enemy⁴⁷⁰. We understand that the initial harmony was destroyed and the power human

⁴⁶⁴ ܠܝܪܝܬܐ.

⁴⁶⁵ II, 3.2, 72.

⁴⁶⁶ Cf. Nestor Kavvadas, “Some observations on the theological anthropology of Isaac of Niniveh and its sources”, *Scrinium IV* (2008), p. 154.

⁴⁶⁷ Nestor Kavvadas, *Some observations on the theological anthropology of Isaac of Niniveh*, p. 155-157.

⁴⁶⁸ ܠܡܝܪܝܬܐ.

⁴⁶⁹ See Sebastian Brock, “Humanity and the natural world in the Syriac tradition”, *Sobornost*, 12 (1990) 2, p. 131-142 (here 131).

⁴⁷⁰ I, 35, p. 153.

had over it turned into fight. And creation is suffering from falling and salvation of human is expected to come through Christ.

From this perspective, the whole ascetic struggle aims at cleansing the mind, so as to be able to read again the presence of God in the world as in a book. We will quote a short fragment where Isaac advocates that a purified mind can read the divine mysteries in the world even better than in the Bible: “when the intellect has been illumined... for contemplation... the nature of created things can serve for mind instead of writings... and receives the ability to be stirred on its contemplation concerning the revered Creator;... and peers inside the divine Holy of Holies”⁴⁷¹

Human was created to be God’s temple, the dwelling of the divinity. As the image of God, he was in potency immortal, as far as ontologically he would have remained close to his Creator, endowed with the five faculties of the soul and five great gifts (life, sense perception, reason, freewill and authority). These five powers doubled by the five gifts target the same process “to become aware of and enjoy the delight of intelligence⁴⁷² and the pleasure⁴⁷³ of the vast gifts of insights^{474,475}. Based on the divine image, these five faculties allow the human grow constantly and to come closer to God in his knowledge, trying to achieve the ultimate goal – the likeness of God, actualised in what Isaac calls deification – that is becoming “gods by the means of grace”⁴⁷⁶. This was the initial purpose – to bring the entire nature of rational beings to unity and equality.

But human has not achieved this state suddenly, according to Isaac, because God wanted to create the world into two stages, specifically “to achieve (salvation) within a history that does not develop only gradually”⁴⁷⁷. According to his theology, at the beginning of creation, human, despite the fact he could be immortal and perfect, he was still a child and mortal, but, nonetheless, he was designed to reach maturity. He was not able to receive perfect

⁴⁷¹ II, 36,2.

⁴⁷² ἡ δὲ αἰσθητικὴ καὶ νοητικὴ.

⁴⁷³ ἡ δὲ αἰσθητικὴ.

⁴⁷⁴ ἡ δὲ αἰσθητικὴ.

⁴⁷⁵ II, 18.18. One can observe here the two directions – by the way of heart and senses (Macarius) and by noetic discipline (Evagrian) – joined in a synthesis in Isaac’s gnoseological perspective – “feeling” (ἡ αἰσθητικὴ), the divine mysteries and the participation by “knowing” (ἡ νοητικὴ) God’s revelation.

⁴⁷⁶ II, 3.1.62. One can observe the different meanings the concept of deification takes. As mentioned above, one can identify, at least, two different types of understanding – Alexandrine (“from up to down”) and Antiochene (“from down to up”). Isaac highlights the knowledge of God’s glory and light and not the divine nature. One may find here also a connection with Diadochus of Photice, Gregory Palamas (and Symeon the New Theologian), cf Antonio Rigo, *De l’apologie à l’évocation de l’expérience mystique. Evagre le Pontique, Isaac le Syrien et Diadoque de Photice dans les œuvres de Grégoire de Palamas (et dans la controverse palamite)*, p. 85-108.

⁴⁷⁷ André Louf, “L’homme dans l’histoire du salut selon Isaac le syrien”, *Connaissance de Pères de L’Eglise*, 88 (2002), p. 49.

knowledge without first being prepared for it⁴⁷⁸. We are dealing with a pedagogical vision of history, which assumes a linear trend without end. From this perspective, the world has a particular important role, it is a school⁴⁷⁹ in which one can make progress, grow, or prepare for the world to come⁴⁸⁰.

In a certain sense it can be said that the human's disobedience brought no direct repercussions in his itinerary of maturation, existing in God's plan before creation. From here we enter the space of original sin and its results. In this chapter the author draws again inspiration from Theodore of Mopsuestia's Protology. Originality occurs mostly when it comes to death, typically understood by the other Fathers of the Church as an effect of sin. For Isaac, death is part of the original destiny of human and the fruit of the love of God, who knew from the beginning that human would fall. This idea is supported with the structure of human itself⁴⁸¹. So death is not the direct repercussion of sin⁴⁸², but sin arises from the fact that human is mortal⁴⁸³. Then God, "through a trick", an expression often used to describe the wonderful destiny constructed by God from human's sin and death, shows His unchanged love regarding him. We might summarize this in three synthetical ideas:

- weakness is used for the benefit and human's growth: the knowledge of God's patience, power and especially his love⁴⁸⁴;
- the expulsion from paradise is not the repercussion of sin, but the gift of divine mercy, for God would not confine the dominion which he gave to human only on Eden, but he wanted to put him ruler over all creation⁴⁸⁵;
- death is not simply a retribution for sin, but becomes the passage to a wonderful and glorious life, part of the destiny of God's merciful attitude towards humanity⁴⁸⁶; by the Incarnation, death is not something frightening, but a short passage to the second catastasis⁴⁸⁷.

⁴⁷⁸ II, 2,3.

⁴⁷⁹ صالمة.

⁴⁸⁰ II, 3.3,71.

⁴⁸¹ II, 3.4,89.

⁴⁸² Here one can clearly find Theodore's idea, based on the fact that even the demons who have sinned have not been punished with death. For details see: Arthur Vööbus, "Regarding the theological anthropology of Theodore of Mopsuestia", *Church History*, 33 (1964) 2, p. 117-118.

⁴⁸³ II, 3.3,2 (The natural character of death was one of the six teachings on the list of Ibn As-Salt, which make the difference between Isaac and the traditional opinion of the Church Fathers, in P. Sbath éd., *Traité religieux, philosophique et moraux, extraits des oeuvres d'Isaac de Ninive (VIIe siècle) par Ibn as-Salt (IXe siècle)*, Imp. 'Al-Chark', Le Caire, 1934, p. 109).

⁴⁸⁴ II, 3.4,89.

⁴⁸⁵ II, 39,4.

⁴⁸⁶ II, 39,4.

⁴⁸⁷ II, 3.3,75.

Adam's sin did not consist in the fact that he wished to become "a god", because this was the destiny that God himself had prepared for him, but that he wanted this without reaching maturity of knowledge and under the instigation of the devil. Then, what initially failed in Adam's case in paradise, God has committed in the new man in the Incarnation⁴⁸⁸. This was the greatest honour that could partake human in Christ's Incarnation⁴⁸⁹.

One can say that Incarnation brings another qualitative gnosiological period. This pertains to all rational natures (angels and humans)⁴⁹⁰. To underline the progressive revelation of God and the qualitative epistemological difference between the two catastases, we will quote one paragraph where Isaac advocates that incarnation represents the revelation of God's plan, that had been hidden to the generations before, foretold by the prophets, which will be completed at the end of time:

Tutto quanto egli avrebbe eccellentemente compiuto in seguito, presso tutta la creazione, non è stato visto da Dio alla fine, ma è stato disposto e preparato da Dio per essere operato fin dal principio, da prima di tutte le generazioni. Esso era nascosto e celato in lui, e non detto. Il suo mistero da ultimo è stato manifestato tramite le profezie e ha ricevuto attuazione tramite l' economia del Cristo, nostro Signore. Ogni cosa poi riceverà compimento quando nostro Signore sorgerà dal cielo, su tutto, e ci farà risorgere dalla polvere e darà rinnovamento e liberazione dal dolore con noi a tutta la creazione, e farà salire con sé tutto alla dimora celeste⁴⁹¹.

3.4 The Incarnation of Christ – the inaugural event of eschatological knowledge

In the Byzantine tradition, the term used to express the manifestation of God in the world through incarnation is *Επιφάνεια*. This term is not used in the Syriac tradition. To talk about incarnation, the authors use either the Syriac *ܕܢܚܐ* (denho), a term related to sunrise, or *ܢܗܪܐ* (nuhro), which designates the festival of Epiphany in the Chaldean liturgy, much closer to the Greek term⁴⁹².

In this chapter we will try to answer to three questions. Firstly, we will focus on identifying the reason for the Incarnation of the Son of God, as expressed in Isaac's writings; secondly we will highlight the novelty of incarnation concerning the relationship between

⁴⁸⁸ III, 5,9.

⁴⁸⁹ III, 5,2.

⁴⁹⁰ II, 3.3,79.

⁴⁹¹ II, 3.3,82.

⁴⁹² Cf. André Louf, "Pourquoi Dieu se manifesta, selon Isaac le Syrien", *Connaissance de Pères de l'Église*, 80 (2000), p. 38.

God and creation; and thirdly, we will focus on the type of knowledge inaugurated by the event of the incarnation.

One can say from the outset that the reason for the existence of the world and the coming of Christ in the world are one and the same: the manifestation of God's great love⁴⁹³. When asked "why did Christ incarnate?", Isaac responds punctually and without doubt – the only reason for incarnation is God's will to be made known to people in a supreme act of love. I will quote a short paragraph where the author clearly points to this idea: "Questo è 'lo svuotamento' di cui parla la divina Scrittura; questo è quello 'svoutò se stesso' di cui ha parlato beato Paolo con ammirazione indicibile, la cui esegesi è la comprensione della storia dell' amore divino", and the highest level of this love is the fact that "the visible creation might be called 'God'⁴⁹⁴... God crowned with the name of the Trinity the creature... He has set the glorious name which even the mouths of the angels are not pure enough to utter"⁴⁹⁵. In another paragraph, while speaking about Christ's crucifixion, Isaac advocates that the main reason for that is to revealing his love "more abundant than the sea": "Dion non ha fatto questo per altra que (quella) di far conoscere⁴⁹⁶ al mondo la carità che ha, perché fossimo resi prigionieri della sua carità"⁴⁹⁷.

In the Economy of incarnation and of the cross⁴⁹⁸, God's love becomes a teacher and a means of bringing closer creation to divinity, in total freedom of conscience. The divine love manifested in Christ's passion gets a pedagogical role⁴⁹⁹ and in consequence becomes a means for foretasting the second catastasis. In this frame, he argues that salvation refers to the free communication between God's and human's love⁵⁰⁰. Isaac calls the cross a symbol of the two testaments and the seal of Christ's Economy, because it was through it that the human race received the accurate knowledge of the Creator. The glory and the power that overshadowed the Old Ark were transferred to the image of the cross, which becomes a means of knowledge of his nature and memory of his providence to all generations throughout the history of salvation⁵⁰¹.

⁴⁹³ II, 3.4, 79-80.

⁴⁹⁴ ܠܗܘܐ ܕܥܡܠܐ ܕܥܡܠܐ.

⁴⁹⁵ III, 5, 14-15.

⁴⁹⁶ ܕܥܡܠܐ.

⁴⁹⁷ II, 3.4, 78.

⁴⁹⁸ One can intuit the great significance of the cross in the personal ascetic life. Isaac of Niniveh dedicates one entire chapter to the prayer before the cross, describing the process of veneration he used to practice (II, 11). See the article by Fitch Fairaday, "Isaac of Nineveh's biblical typology of the Cross", *Studia Patristica* 35 (2001), p. 385-390.

⁴⁹⁹ See the verbs ܕܥܡܠܐ (make known) and ܕܥܡܠܐ ܕܥܡܠܐ (bring closer).

⁵⁰⁰ I, 74, p. 342-343 (B, 509).

⁵⁰¹ II, 11, 25, 22, 31.

The most significant paragraph that synthetically deals with this subject is found in the third centuria of the Second collection. There, Isaac establishes a primacy of reasons for incarnation. While arguing that the consideration of salvation from sin as the main argument for God's descending in the world is tantamount to minimising the significance of Christ's Economy, he stresses that the Son of God incarnated so that "the world may feel⁵⁰² the charity of God regarding creation". This describes the "Economy of renewal"⁵⁰³.

Based on this statement, Isaac systematically lists more arguments in a speech to challenge the view that the coming of Christ into the world was due to sin, opposing the idea mentioned in the paragraph above – the only reason for his incarnation is to communicate his love to creation. Isaac's objections against such a theory could be summarized in three points:

- if the purpose of incarnation had been forgiveness of sins, then Christ would have done it in another way, through a "simple death" and without accepting so much suffering in his death on the cross;
- interpreting the incarnation as redemption of sins means minimising the significance of Christ's death and his coming into the world, and therefore calculating the power of sin as greater than God's power to destroy it, requiring the death of Christ; and hence the third argument
- through a superficial reading of the Holy Scriptures, one can say that if man had not sinned, Christ would not have come into the world and, in consequence, both humans and angels would have been deprived of his light and knowledge⁵⁰⁴.

Stemming from the third argument a full apology is developed, evidenced by the rhetoric interrogation: "Shall we really be grateful to sin for we owe it the gift of all these goodies, and could it be ascribed to it all these mysteries?" His response calls for a spiritual reading of Scripture, to the detriment of an infantile reading⁵⁰⁵ of God's Economy, which supposes to surpass the "external part of it"⁵⁰⁶. A mature reading of the Scriptures is accomplished as a work of grace, while remaining within the borders of human nature⁵⁰⁷. The

⁵⁰² *ܐܝܢܐ*.

⁵⁰³ *ܡܠܟܐ ܕܥܠܡ ܕܥܠܡܐ*.

⁵⁰⁴ Professor I. Hausherr, in a short article, calls Isaac precursory of John Scottus regarding his perspective of the reason for Christ's incarnation, on the base of this fragment. For details see "Un précurseur de la théorie scotiste sur la fin de l'incarnation – Isaac de Ninive", *Etudes de Spiritualité Orientale*, Orientalia Christiana Analecta, 183, Roma, 1969, p. 1-5.

⁵⁰⁵ *ܐܝܢܐ ܕܥܠܡܐ*.

⁵⁰⁶ *ܡܠܟܐ ܕܥܠܡܐ*.

⁵⁰⁷ II, 3.4, 78.

end of this process is the meeting with God – the Trinity, with its distinct hypostases “in the mystery of love”⁵⁰⁸, revealed in human’s body by incarnation.

One may argue that, by emphasizing the role of love in incarnation so much, Isaac risks to undermine the soteriological dogma’s central place within Christian teaching⁵⁰⁹. However, Metropolitan Hilarion Alfeyev advocates that with Isaac, the doctrine of salvation is interpreted in a particular manner: the soteriological act of Christ is, above all, the restoration of the primacy of love that originally existed between God and the world, destroyed by human’s fall. During this time, God, as a father, did not leave them along, but, by the means of his love, reminded the people of this originary state. And because he wanted them to return to him as to their father and have direct knowledge of the future life, incarnated, and, taking a human body⁵¹⁰, forgot their sins and revealed his mysteries^{511 512}.

The fall of the first man brought a separation, a distance, between creator and creation, sin itself made this distance increase and, in consequence, God was experienced more as a despot. From this point of view, incarnation opens a new path. Not only does Christ meet creation, but, moreover, he unites with it, and the latter one gets another dimension: the union in Christ between the divine nature and human nature has revealed to people the secret union of all things and matters; humanity becomes spiritualized and transparent to God, the mirror (image) thus regains God’s presence. Christ assumes matter, and creation is “mingled” with God. We will quote a significant short passage to support this idea: “The world has become mingled with God and creation and Creator have become one”⁵¹³.

The use of “mingling”, denoting the relationship Redeemer – world overcomes the boundary of a strictly diophysite East Syriac language⁵¹⁴, which does not allow at all the use of this terminology when referring to the union of natures in Christ⁵¹⁵. The intimacy of

⁵⁰⁸ ܠܠܗܝܢ ܠܝܠܝܐ.

⁵⁰⁹ The most common vision at the Church Fathers became an axiom – “If man had not died, Christ would not have incarnated” (Irineus of Lyon, *Adv. Haer.* IV,14; V,1; Athanasius the Great, *De Incarnatione* 80; Augustine, *In Evangelium Ioannis* II, 4). Isaac clearly excludes here the *felix culpa* of Augustine. See Brenda Fitch Firaday, “Isaac of Niniveh’s typology of the cross”, *Studia Patristica* 35 (2001), p. 385-390.

⁵¹⁰ ܠܠܗܝܢ ܠܝܠܝܐ ܠܠܗܝܢ ܠܝܠܝܐ.

⁵¹¹ ܠܠܗܝܢ ܠܝܠܝܐ.

⁵¹² II, 40,14 (See Evagrius, *Capita Cognoscitiva*, ed. J. Muyldermans, “Évagre le Pontique: les Capita Cognoscitiva dans les versions syriaques et arméniennes”, *Les muséon* 47 (1934), p. 73-106 (here 89); *Supplement to Kephalaia. Gnostica*, in Frankenberg, *Evagrius Ponticus*, 422-70 (§ 43); John the Solitary, *Dialogue sur l’âme*, p. 7, 56).

⁵¹³ ܠܠܗܝܢ ܠܝܠܝܐ ܠܠܗܝܢ ܠܝܠܝܐ ܠܠܗܝܢ ܠܝܠܝܐ; II, 5,18.

⁵¹⁴ Cf. Hilarion Alfeyev, *The spiritual world*, p. 73.

⁵¹⁵ The theme of “mingling” of God with creation is characteristic also to Ephrem referring to Incarnation and Eucharist; John of Apamea also uses the term ‘mingling’ referring to Christ, to describe the mystery of communion, as a model of Christ’s association with us (for the use of “mingling” in the Syriac tradition see C.

creation with Creator described by this mingling reveals the mystery of the union of all, each one maintaining its characteristics and its personality, fulfilled in the eschatological time. This union is called by Isaac “deification”⁵¹⁶, which is also typical for Byzantine terminology. In the fifth discourse of the Third collection, the bishop of Niniveh develops this topic at large. This chapter talks about three qualitative stages while approaching the relation of creation and God: the beginning of creation, the time of incarnation and the eschatological state. It will perhaps be useful for the discussion to quote a paragraph which summaries the main elements to understand this gnoseological evolution:

One may know the true love of God for creation from this that after He had finished its structure in all its parts, He brought it altogether into one unity⁵¹⁷: sensible realities and spiritual ones into one bond and He joined it to His divinity⁵¹⁸ and He raised it above all the heavens and set it on an everlasting throne and made it ‘God’ over all... “The union of Christ in the divinity⁵¹⁹ has indicated to us the mystery of the unity of all in Christ”⁵²⁰. This is the mystery: that all creation by means of one⁵²¹ has been brought near to God in a mystery⁵²². Then it is transmitted to all. Thus all is united in Him⁵²³ as the members in a body⁵²⁴; He however is the head of all. This action was performed for all creation. There will, indeed, be a time when no part will fall short of the whole⁵²⁵ ...⁵²⁶

One could observe in this quotation the idea of a progressive gnoseological journey constructed on the vision of the two Theodorian stages. The unity of God and the world, made from the moment of creation, develops and finds its fulfilment in Christ’s union with creation

Stewart, “Working the Earth of the Hearth”. *The Messalian Controversy on History. Texts and Language to A.D. 431*, Oxford, 1991, p. 169-203).

⁵¹⁶ ܠܗܘܐ ܕܥܡܐܠܐ; becoming god – ܠܗܘܐ ܕܥܡܐܠܐ (III, 5,4).

⁵¹⁷ ܠܗܘܐ ܕܥܡܐܠܐ.

⁵¹⁸ ܕܥܡܐܠܐ ܕܥܡܐܠܐ. For the unity of creation and God in one entity see also II, 3.3,81, II, 3.2,19; on becoming gods II, 3.1,62, II,3.3,70, III, 3,15, 38, III,7,29. The terminology involved in this fragment is similar with that of Evagrius, *Letter to Melany*, in G.Vitestam (ed.), *Seconde partie du Traité qui passe sur le nom ‘La grande lettre d’Évagre le Pontique à Mélanie l’Ancienne’, publiée et traduite après le manuscrit du British Museum Add. 17192*, Lund, 1963, p. 25-27 and A. Guillaumont, *Les six centuries des ‘Kephalaia Gnostica’ d’Évagre le Pontique*, Paris, 1958, PO 28/1, p. 158-159.

⁵¹⁹ ܠܗܘܐ ܕܥܡܐܠܐ ܕܥܡܐܠܐ ܕܥܡܐܠܐ.

⁵²⁰ ܠܗܘܐ ܕܥܡܐܠܐ ܕܥܡܐܠܐ ܕܥܡܐܠܐ; One can identify similarities between this language and Evagrius’ terminology. See J. Muyldermans (ed.), *Evagriana Syriaca. Textes inédits du British Museum et de la Vatican*, Louvain, 1952, (BM 31), p. 127.

⁵²¹ Rom. 5:17-19.

⁵²² ܠܗܘܐ ܕܥܡܐܠܐ ܕܥܡܐܠܐ ܕܥܡܐܠܐ ܕܥܡܐܠܐ.

⁵²³ ܠܗܘܐ ܕܥܡܐܠܐ.

⁵²⁴ Rom. 12:5; 1 Co. 12,12; Eph. 5:30; see also Evagrius, *Letter to Melany*, in W. Frankenberg, *Evagrius Ponticus*, Berlin 1912, p. 616 and F. S. Marsh (ed.), *The Book which is Called the Book of the Holy Hierotheus*, Oxford, 1927, p. 120.

⁵²⁵ Here Isaac expresses the idea of the final unity, while quoting Evagrius, Theodore of Mopsuestia or Diodore of Tarsus, that pertains to the highest gnoseological level. See also III, 6,18,62; II, 3.1,10 (quoting Evagrius), 19 (quoting Theodore), 61, 68, 91-91; II, 3.3,77, 81-82; and especially II, 38-41.

⁵²⁶ III, 5,2,10.

Isaac, while trying to explain the history of salvation. For the bishop of Niniveh there is an obvious qualitative difference between the level of knowledge before the incarnation of Christ and after this event: if before incarnation, one could hardly hear the voice of God, and only by those elected by divine calling, after incarnation, by means of divine grace, the human is able to see God face to face. In ancient times, God's people were only able to experience a mediated knowledge, through intercession, in and with creation, after incarnation God inaugurated a direct noetic knowledge, by means of the divine grace⁵³⁶.

In this framework, Isaac provides a chronology of the history of salvation from Adam's falling time in three generations: the "first generation" of mankind, which lost the memory of God in their lives and hardly remembered him; the "middle generation", that enjoyed a limited knowledge; and, thirdly, 'the new generation", which received the revelation of God in his incarnation. The image of God in these three generations bears qualitative changes upwardly, in the sense of a progressive history. In the first generation, God revealed as a "judge"⁵³⁷, in the next generation, for the rights of the Old Testament, as a "master"⁵³⁸, and to the generation inaugurated by incarnation, he revealed as "father"^{539 540}.

The fragment quoted above marks an evident qualitative difference in the knowledge of God between the third generation and the first two ones. A father comes closer to his children. Children do not need intermediaries to communicate with their father, as their relationship implies a direct dialogue. In this framework, Isaac claims that any revelation before incarnation is done either through material visions or by angels, and nobody can speak of God as direct author, and all refer to earthly life. Instead, the revelation after incarnation has been actively generated by the Holy Spirit and refers to the eschatological reality, to the "knowledge of those hidden"⁵⁴¹ and the "future world"^{542,543}.

At the same time, if the knowledge of the ancient times was mostly exterior, the new knowledge pertains to the inner part of the new human, it is a noetic knowledge. In the next paragraphs, Isaac systematically advocated this idea, using as example the revelation received by Moses on Mount Sinai – the sound of trumpets and "the terrible sight" was due to angelic revelation (§ 30). And this revelation had a visible and sensible character. The new

⁵³⁶ I, 82, p. 384-385.

⁵³⁷ ܐܠܗܐ.

⁵³⁸ ܐܠܗܐ ܕܡܪܝܬܐ.

⁵³⁹ ܐܠܗܐ ܕܡܪܝܬܐ.

⁵⁴⁰ II, 3.1, 17.

⁵⁴¹ ܐܠܗܐ ܕܡܪܝܬܐ.

⁵⁴² ܐܠܗܐ ܕܡܪܝܬܐ.

⁵⁴³ III, 9, 29-30.

knowledge, pertaining to the eschatological reality, does not simply flow from sounds and sight, but in the intelligible part⁵⁴⁴, which is in the mind⁵⁴⁵, and refers to the knowledge of the intelligible reality⁵⁴⁶ and the delight of silence⁵⁴⁷, in which “in this a mirror (1 Corinthians 13:12) of the new world (Matthew 19:28) is received, making us taste, by means of the Spirit, that life beyond, which we shall receive (1 Corinthians 2, 10-11)” (§ 31).

The people of the new generation are “renewed in their minds” by a “new knowledge”⁵⁴⁸, that has not been revealed to the ancient generations, which had a childish thinking. One short paragraph is worth quoting, where Isaac clearly delineates the two different qualitative types of knowledge: “For we have known this Being who has no beginning nor end. And again, they had a childish way of thinking about God⁵⁴⁹,... we possess a greater sense of God⁵⁵⁰, and we have an elevated knowledge of Him^{551,552}. This occurs by the revelation of God in Christ, who is “the key of the mysteries⁵⁵³ and the end of the mysteries”⁵⁵⁴. In Christ’s Economy⁵⁵⁵, God opened the “door of the secrets hidden for centuries in him”⁵⁵⁶.

The new knowledge, generated and inaugurated in incarnation is carried out at noetic level. This feature is the fundamental difference between the new knowledge and the knowledge of the ancient generations. Faithful to the symbolic language specific to his Syriac tradition, Isaac interprets “Mount Zion” as the image of the heavenly Jerusalem, the City of God, where one can enter only by the faith⁵⁵⁷ and the knowledge⁵⁵⁸ in/of Christ, by divine contemplation of mind, along with the heavenly powers. One should emphasize that here it is not about a dogmatic faith, but about an experiential faith, described as participation in the eschatological reality, that stands in close connection with the sight/contemplation⁵⁵⁹ of the mind⁵⁶⁰. At this stage, one anticipates the experience of eternity. Such knowledge is treated by

⁵⁴⁴ ܐܠܗܐ ܕܡܠܚܬܐ ܕܡܢܐ.

⁵⁴⁵ ܡܢܐ.

⁵⁴⁶ ܐܠܗܐ ܕܡܠܚܬܐ ܕܡܢܐ.

⁵⁴⁷ ܐܠܗܐ ܕܡܠܚܬܐ ܕܡܢܐ.

⁵⁴⁸ ܐܠܗܐ ܕܡܠܚܬܐ.

⁵⁴⁹ ܐܠܗܐ ܕܡܠܚܬܐ.

⁵⁵⁰ ܐܠܗܐ ܕܡܠܚܬܐ.

⁵⁵¹ ܐܠܗܐ ܕܡܠܚܬܐ.

⁵⁵² III, 11, 4-5.

⁵⁵³ ܐܠܗܐ ܕܡܠܚܬܐ.

⁵⁵⁴ ܐܠܗܐ ܕܡܠܚܬܐ.

⁵⁵⁵ ܐܠܗܐ ܕܡܠܚܬܐ.

⁵⁵⁶ III, 7, 31.

⁵⁵⁷ ܐܠܗܐ ܕܡܠܚܬܐ.

⁵⁵⁸ ܐܠܗܐ.

⁵⁵⁹ ܐܠܗܐ ܕܡܠܚܬܐ.

⁵⁶⁰ III, 7, 17.

Isaac as the true resurrection, which is closely related to the sacramental ministry of the Church and, at the same time, designates the spiritual resurrection in the ascetical life, on which we will dwell at large in the next chapter. A very representative paragraph from the Third collection must be indicated to support this idea:

This is therefore the true resurrection which ‘occurs’ by knowledge, by an assured faith and the renewal of the mind. Those who were baptized in Christ have received it in the hope of the future world. The blessed Paul says: ‘Christ’ raised us up and made us ascend and sit with him in heaven. Whoever has entered the thick darkness of the knowledge of faith⁵⁶¹ and has known the power of its mysteries is always in heaven in his intellect, and sits with Christ by means of the continual appearance⁵⁶² of His marvelous Economy... signify that our belief in the knowledge of truth is a gift of God⁵⁶³ ...⁵⁶⁴.

This fragment clearly points to the connection Isaac makes between baptism, pneumatology and eschatology, a fundamental characteristic for the East Syriac mysticism⁵⁶⁵. The second stage inaugurated by incarnation is eschatologically oriented. The unification of creation with divinity in the event of incarnation is the icon and the guarantee of the final unity of God⁵⁶⁶.

Nothing will be lost, everything will be united with Him, everything will be saved, and everything is one⁵⁶⁷. The connection that has already been initiated with Adam, potentially achieved in Christ, is perfected now. This unity also refers to sinners and even to demons⁵⁶⁸. All creation will be in solidarity with God, in “one single love⁵⁶⁹/ perfection of love”, “a single purpose⁵⁷⁰”, “single will⁵⁷¹”, “an excellent state of knowledge⁵⁷²/ single knowledge”, “with the desire of an insatiable love^{573>574}”.

The great final landscape, in the unity of God’s love, when He “will be all in all” (1 Corinthians 15:28), is the very purpose that God had in his initial plan. Mutual sharing of

⁵⁶¹ ܠܚܝܬܐܡܪܐ ܠܬܠܡܕܐ.

⁵⁶² ܠܬܠܡܕܐ ܠܝܘܡܐ.

⁵⁶³ ܠܝܬܠܡܕܐ ܠܬܠܡܕܐ. See also I, 62, p. 430; I, 72, p. 494; II, 8,1; II, 3.3,59,99; 9, title, 2,4; X, 15,16 ; 13,1; 14, 33,44; 25, title; 35,5; 37, 3-4; this expressions occurs frequently in Evagrius (KG I.14, 52, 89; II.10,19).

⁵⁶⁴ III, 11, 31-32.

⁵⁶⁵ For details see Antoine Guillaumont, „Syriac (Spiritualité)”, *DS XIV*, 1990, col. 1429-1442.

⁵⁶⁶ III, 5,10.

⁵⁶⁷ Cf. Paolo Bettolo, *Avec la charité comme but*, p. 338.

⁵⁶⁸ II, 40,4.

⁵⁶⁹ ܠܠܗܐ ܝܗܐ.

⁵⁷⁰ ܠܬܠܡܕܐ ܝܗܐ.

⁵⁷¹ ܠܬܠܡܕܐ ܝܗܐ.

⁵⁷² ܠܬܠܡܕܐ ܠܬܠܡܕܐ ܝܗܐ. This expression also occurs in Evagrius (KG III.72; IV.72); John Solitary (L.G. Rignell, *Briefe con Johannes dem Einsiedler*, Lund, 1941, p. 62); Theodore of Mopsuestia (A. Mingana, *Commentary of Theodore of Mopsuestia on the Nicene Creed*, 1930, p. 130).

⁵⁷³ ܠܬܠܡܕܐ ܠܬܠܡܕܐ ܝܗܐ.

⁵⁷⁴ II, 40,5.

love, along with partaking of divine knowledge in contemplation of the Divine Being, describes the eternal happiness. Of the five spiritual powers with which human is endowed, only two will go with him in eternity – the simple rationality and the natural desire – corresponding to the knowledge of God and the communion of love, the only ones necessary for the eschatological life. We will quote a short text where Isaac expresses this idea, arguing the role of both in the life to come:

Due di loro sono custodite senza fremito fino al tempo successivo alla resurrezione, cioè fino all'uso del mondo futuro. Tutto l'uso della condotta che (è) nei cieli risiede infatti in esse: una è la razionalità semplice⁵⁷⁵, che è l'intelletto gnostico⁵⁷⁶ in cui (l'anima) è mossa nella contemplazione di quell'Essenza che è tutto il fine del regno dei cieli ed entro il cui stupore è serbato l'intelletto di tutti gli esseri dotati di ragione, primi e ultimi; (l'altra è) il desiderio della sua natura⁵⁷⁷, da cui è mosso il piacere per la grande carità⁵⁷⁸ del Creatore, da cui allora sarà (resa) perfetta tutta la natura degli uomini e insieme degli angeli e (dei) demoni⁵⁷⁹.

This final unity requires a renewal, a transfiguration of the body and soul together. The body, renewed in the image of his Creator⁵⁸⁰, and the soul, with its two functions, will continue its history in the process of knowledge of the reality of God's kingdom, doubled by a simultaneous progressive participation in divine love. These two works, according to the bishop of Nineveh, describe the content of the after death life.

3.5 Conclusion

To make a short summary of the analysis we developed in this chapter, it must be mentioned that along the line of Theodore of Mopsuestia's thinking, Isaac of Niniveh starts the history of salvation from the premise that death is related to the natural condition of human, and yet, the fall of Adam acquires the character of a punishment for sin, serving to maintain the human hatred regarding evil. In this context, salvation is seen as a linear educational process, meant to make humans feel the need for God's law. As a result, God gradually reveals his commandments through the prophets, so that humans would not fall into despair. Objectively, the maximum revelation has been achieved in Christ's incarnation and resurrection, and, subjectively, it occurs along with the calling of humans to participate in baptism and sacramental life, in general, interpreted as cognitive experience and anticipation of the eschatological future state⁵⁸¹.

⁵⁷⁵ ܐܝܬܐܢܐ ܕܐܝܬܐܢܐ.

⁵⁷⁶ ܐܝܬܐܢܐ ܕܐܝܬܐܢܐ.

⁵⁷⁷ ܐܝܬܐܢܐ ܕܐܝܬܐܢܐ.

⁵⁷⁸ ܐܝܬܐܢܐ ܕܐܝܬܐܢܐ.

⁵⁷⁹ II, 3.3,77.

⁵⁸⁰ II 3.3,74.

⁵⁸¹ For a good summary of Isaac's very soteriological dynamism, binded to God's eternal plan see II, 3.3,82.

4. The cognitive terminology

As a natural continuation of the research one finds necessary to dwell on the vocabulary Isaac uses to express his gnoseological perspective. The first observation egarding this issue refers to the process of “knowledge” itself. When using this concept, the bishop of Niniveh refers to a synthetic process described as the aim of the ascetical life. In his view, the mystical path merges with the process knowledge, from one stage to a superior stage up to spiritual knowledge. One can assert without exaggeration that, for Isaac, talking about “knowledge” means referring to a complex ascetical-anthropological system. His work can be read as an evolution from bodily asceticism (above the material knowledge), the asceticism of the soul (psychical) and, finally, entering in the world of incorporeal, the level of the spirit, where one contemplates the Holy Trinity (spiritual knowledge or divine theoria). These three stages correspond to the two dimensions of human: physical (body⁵⁸²) and the spiritual, with the two components (soul⁵⁸³ and spirit⁵⁸⁴, I Thessalonians 5:23).

We will refer firstly to the terminology colligated to the three stages mentioned above, then the powers directly involved in the process of knowledge. The next section will be dedicated to the forms of knowledge and, finally, the last part will focus on some adjacent terms in the process of knowledge.

4.1 *Three ascetical stages*

We will synthetically refer to the three ascetical stages, as, in the next section, the subject will be dwelt at length. From the very beginning, it has been mentioned that each of these stages corresponds to a certain knowledge which uses specific faculties/ powers and develops certain gnoseological forms. At this point, Isaac makes an interesting synthesis between the Semitic-biblical vision of John the Solitary and the philosophical-ascetical system of Evagrius of Pontus. In short, we will say that John the Solitary, while interpreting 1 Thessalonian 5:23, speaks of three stages: the somatic state (of the body), dominated by carnal passions, contrary to nature; the noetic state, according to nature/ natural, transitory to the spirituality of angels, which presupposes a rough physical and intellectual asceticism; and the spiritual state, above nature⁵⁸⁵, which is communion with God, a foretaste of the future

⁵⁸² *νῖψα*.

⁵⁸³ *νῦα*.

⁵⁸⁴ *νῦσι*.

⁵⁸⁵ I, 3, p. 16 (B, 23).

world⁵⁸⁶. Isaac summaries this vision and places the first stage under the spectrum of fear of death, the second under the fear of judgment, and the third in the experience of love. The following paragraph is meant to illustrate this idea:

While his knowledge and his behaviour are of bodily nature⁵⁸⁷, he is frightened by death. But when his knowledge is of psychic nature⁵⁸⁸ and his behaviour is steadfast, his mind is moved by the thought of Judgement every moment. In the first state he belongs wholly to nature; in the psychic state he is moved and guided by his knowledge and his discipline. And he is happy in the neighbourhood of God. But when he reaches true knowledge⁵⁸⁹ by the motion of the apperception of God's mysteries⁵⁹⁰ and becomes confirmed in future hope, he is consumed by love. He, that is bodily⁵⁹¹, as an animal fears being slathered; he who is rational⁵⁹² fears the Judgement of God. He that has become a son is pleasing to love... for love annihilates fear⁵⁹³.

In other places, however, when describing the process of knowledge, Isaac of Niniveh goes along with Evagrius, who speaks about two periods and two stages: practical⁵⁹⁴ and gnostic⁵⁹⁵. In the first stage, humans fight against the passions (so called eight evil spirits), demons and thoughts; it represents the active stage, as the name suggests, leading to what Evagrius names apathy⁵⁹⁶. The second phase develops itself into two stages: natural contemplation⁵⁹⁷ and the knowledge or the vision of God⁵⁹⁸. Natural contemplation, in its turn, divides into two stages: secondary natural contemplation of the material reality and the inner logos, within the visible beings, and the primary natural contemplation, which aims to the vision of the spiritual beings. The second phase is already a spiritual science that goes beyond the mere sight of bodies, in understanding their logoi and the wisdom of the Creator in the hidden invisible beings. Therefore it makes the effective transition towards the theological knowledge, the spiritual contemplation, or the vision of the light of the Holy Trinity. Evagrius does not admit the vision of God on earth, but only the “place of God”, “the formless light”,

⁵⁸⁶ *Dialogues sur l'âme e les passions des hommes* 13-4, “Orientalia Christiana Analecta”, Roma, 1939; See also: Bruce Bradley, “Jean le Solitaire”, *Dictionnaire de Spiritualité* VIII, col. 765-772 ; Paul Harb, “Doctrine spirituelle de Jean le Solitaire”, *Parole de l'Orient*, 2 (1971), p. 225-260.

⁵⁸⁷ כִּי־עַל כִּי־בִּנְיָ ; Literally – bodily conduct.

⁵⁸⁸ כִּי־עַל כִּי־בִּנְיָ ; Literally – order/ stage of the soul.

⁵⁸⁹ כִּי־עַל כִּי־בִּנְיָ .

⁵⁹⁰ ,מִן־הַיְּסוּדִים כִּי־בִּנְיָ יִבְנֶה .

⁵⁹¹ כִּי־עַל .

⁵⁹² רַב־לֵב .

⁵⁹³ I, 3, p. 288 (B, 429-430); the tripartition of the spiritual life occurs also in Evagrius (*Letter to Melany*).

⁵⁹⁴ πρακτική.

⁵⁹⁵ γνωστική.

⁵⁹⁶ ἀπάθεια.

⁵⁹⁷ φυσική.

⁵⁹⁸ θεολογική.

“the light of the intellect”⁵⁹⁹. So as to support Evagrius’ influence on Isaac gnoseological system, a short fragment of his discourses is shown below:

The service of the cross is a double one. And this is in accordance with its twofold nature which is divided into two parts: patience in face of bodily troubles, which is accompanied through the instrumentality of the anger⁶⁰⁰ of the soul; this is called practice (praxis⁶⁰¹). And: the subtle intellectual service, an intercourse with God, constant prayer and so on, which is performed with the desiring part⁶⁰² and called theory (theoria⁶⁰³). The one purifies the affectable part⁶⁰⁴ by the strength of the zeal⁶⁰⁵; the other clears the intellectual part⁶⁰⁶ by the influence of the love⁶⁰⁷ of the soul which is the natural appetite⁶⁰⁸.

For a concise summary, we will use a table describing in parallel Isaac’s gnoseological itinerary and that of John the Solitary and Evagrius of Pontus, noting the differences between the three stages at these three authors. The conclusion one can draw is that Isaac gives a personal interpretation of the system of the two authors to whom is indebt.

⁵⁹⁹ For a synthetical vision see Antoine et Claire Guillaumont, “Evagre le Pontique”, DS IV, col. 1731-1744.

⁶⁰⁰ Դժուարաց; Gr. τὸ θυμικὸν μέρος.

⁶⁰¹ Դժուարաց.

⁶⁰² Դժուարաց; Gr. τὸ ἐπιθυμητικὸν μέρος.

⁶⁰³ Դժուարաց.

⁶⁰⁴ Դժուարաց Դժուարաց.

⁶⁰⁵ Դժուարաց Դժուարաց.

⁶⁰⁶ Դժուարաց Դժուարաց.

⁶⁰⁷ Դժուարաց.

⁶⁰⁸ Դժուարաց Դժուարաց; I, 2, p. 10 (B, 15).

	<i>Bodily stage</i>	<i>The stage of the soul</i>	<i>Spiritual stage</i>
<i>John the Solitary</i>	<i>Against nature</i> , subject to matter, passions, the intellect incapable of feeling the spiritual reality; stage of servants;	<i>According to nature</i> , transitory to the spirituality of angels, a dynamic ascetic life; stage of mercenaries;	<i>Beyond nature</i> , purity, limpidity, spiritual mysteries of the world to come; perfection; unknown knowledge; stage of the sons;
<i>Evagrius</i>	Both of them form the practical stage: bodily and noetic asceticism; is extended up to the secondary natural contemplation, which anticipates the gnostic stage;		Inaugurated by the primary natural contemplation; theological knowledge or the vision of the light of the Holy Trinity;
<i>Isaac of Niniveh</i>	<i>Against nature</i> ; subject to passions.	Bodily conduct (<i>according to nature</i>) – bodily asceticism (purification of the body); The conduct of the soul (psychic) – noetic asceticism (purification of thoughts); Contemplation of the judgment and providence, and the primary and secondary natural contemplation (the latter one inaugurates the spiritual stage); purification of the intellect;	Spiritual conduct (<i>above the nature</i>) – the intellect is clear, so the heart; Beyond any movement, prayer, or weariness; wonder and theoria (contemplation) of Christ and the Holy Trinity.

This is the frame within one should interpret the three elements: the body pertaining either to unnatural condition or bodily asceticism; the soul (psyche) as the state according to nature or the noetic asceticism; and the spirit with direct reference to the vision of God or the supernatural state.

One observation should be made: it is easy to understand, both from the original text and the translations that Isaac of Niniveh uses a technical language, inherited from previous Syriac authors and the translations into Syriac of some ascetical and theological Greek writings. Generally, he is faithful to his Church's linguistic tradition, but sometimes he re-interprets some concepts. Interpreting his doctrine of knowledge requires firstly an understanding of the specific technical terms involved to express it. And here we refer to the terminology that describes the process of knowledge itself, the forms and the powers (anatomical and spiritual) that are directly responsible with this process. The German

translator of Isaac's writings, Gustav Bickell, notes the difficulty of understanding the terminology that describes Isaac's spiritual itinerary. That is why he underlines the limitations of a translation into German, idea that can be enlarged to other modern language as well: "We must ask special indulgence for this translation, not only because Isaac of Nineveh is one of the most difficult Syriac authors, but also because of the many psychological and mystical terms which are extremely difficult to translate into German, since German often has no equivalent term, or one which would not be understood by most readers"⁶⁰⁹. For this reason, as we will see later on, in the contemporary translations, there is no terminological uniformity while describing the process of knowledge.

4.2 *The cognitive faculties*

The first term to which we will refer is the one that names the gnoseological process itself – "knowledge"⁶¹⁰ (it occurs in the First collection 83 times, in the second 178 times, and in the third 78 times). At this point, the method used is to analyse the way in which Isaac understands and uses this concept.

One of the classic places where the bishop of Nineveh speaks about the process of knowledge is chapter 53 of the First collection. There, he highlights the uniqueness and unity of the process itself and, at the same time, evokes the changes or the continuous developments that it entails. There is one process that follows three evolutive phases, according to the same number of ascetical stages:

There are three stages⁶¹¹ in which knowledge ascends and descends in an intelligible way, and where it receives its variations according to variations of the places in which it moves... The three stages are: body, soul, spirit. And though knowledge is one in each nature, it becomes condensed or subtilance in accordance with its abiding in this intelligible places...It is a gift presented by God unto the rational beings... it is simple in nature, not divided...but has variations and divisions in connection with its service⁶¹².

One may understand that, when describing this process, Isaac refers mostly to two dimensions of knowledge, correspondant to the three progressive levels evoked in the quotation above – the worldly knowledge (philosophical, natural, discursive, deductive, intellectual), correspondant to the first two ascetical stages, and the spiritual knowledge (theological, supernatural, intuitive, inductive, experiential), correspondent to the third stage.

⁶⁰⁹ *Bibliothek der Kirchenväter*, fasc. 204, p. 290.

⁶¹⁰ ܠܡܕܢܐ.

⁶¹¹ ܬܠܬ ܬܬܝܒܐ ܕܡܕܢܐ ܕܝܫܘܥܐ.

⁶¹² I, 51, p. 248 (B, 369).

In this frame, his work can be read in this key – the superiority of the spiritual to the worldly knowledge. If the former refers to the process of knowledge by research⁶¹³, by virtue⁶¹⁴, and is called simple⁶¹⁵, sensitive⁶¹⁶ and, finally, natural knowledge⁶¹⁷, the second, in contrast, refers to a knowledge out of faith⁶¹⁸, by love⁶¹⁹, supernatural⁶²⁰, spiritual⁶²¹, and, ultimately, it develops into spiritual vision⁶²². We will stop here for the moment with this issue as the next chapter will be dedicated at length to the definition of this process and the analysis of its different types.

The next step is to submit to a philological analysis the Syriac terms that Isaac employs to describe the mental and spiritual powers that participate and generate the knowledge. To each of the two types or modes of knowledge⁶²³ there are certain corresponding spiritual powers to perform this process. At this moment we will dwell only on four terms Isaac mostly employs, borrowed from the ascetical literature to describe the modes of manifestation of the soul's mental and spiritual faculties, as later on we will focus at large on the powers, modes, forms and acts of knowledge, in the frame of the theological-anthropological tradition of his time. These terms are: ܠܡܐ, ܠܡܐܝܢ, ܠܡܝܢ, ܠܡܝܢܝܬܐ, by which human “knows”. The translation of these terms into modern languages created difficulties, because, on the one hand, modern speakers are not familiar with the exact epistemological definitions of the ancient world, and, on the other hand, the terminology used is complex and sometimes flexible. Difficulties have occurred upon the translation into Greek of the First collection, since the first two terms (ܠܡܐ, ܠܡܐܝܢ,) expressed almost the same meaning. This is why the Greek translator chose one word for both of them, on the line of the ascetical tradition – νοῦς.

However, we think it is absolutely necessary to try to explain the nuances or even the differences between these four terms involved directly in the analysis. Professor Sebastian Brock argues that there is enough fluidity in Isaac's technical speech, as the author did not want to picture a systematic guide on the inner life, but his works are directly related to the

⁶¹³ I, 51, p. 242 (B, 360).

⁶¹⁴ I, 3, p. 21 (B, 30).

⁶¹⁵ II, 3.2,77.

⁶¹⁶ I, 3, p. 21 (B, 31).

⁶¹⁷ I, 52, p. 253 (B, 378).

⁶¹⁸ I, 51, p. 242 (360).

⁶¹⁹ I, 3, p. 21 (B, 31).

⁶²⁰ I, 52, p. 253 (B, 378).

⁶²¹ II, 3.2,77.

⁶²² I, 3, p. 21 (B, 31).

⁶²³ For them we will use mostly the term „faculty”. The concept is quite new, referring to Isaac's writings. We decided conventionally to use it so that to point to the difference between the soul's cognitive power, on which we will dwell at large in the next chapter, and its modes of acting, comprised mostly in the four terms in discussion.

specific practical requests of the audience he addressed. The Syriac scholar speaks about the interchangeability between some technical terms and, to support this idea, he gives as example the very ones that we are analysing here: ܡܥܡܐ (intellect), ܡܕܢܐ, ܡܬܝܢܐ (mind) and ܠܒܐ (heart)⁶²⁴. The other translators, whilst acknowledging the difficulty of an accurate translation of these terms into a foreign language, sought to play with a specific term, compresive to contemporary language. Thus the first term (hauna) is rendered by “intellect”, the second (mad’a) by “mind”, the third one (re’yana) by “thinking/ reflection” and the last one (tar’itha) by “intelligence” or “conscience”. But nonetheless there is no perfect uniformity among contemporary translators, as one can see from the glossaries of the translations⁶²⁵.

The first term to deal with is ܡܥܡܐ (intellect)⁶²⁶, trying to grasp the specific meaning Isaac himself gives. In this frame, André Louf, in the glossary of his translation of the second and Third collections of Isaac’s discourses, shows that “hauna” – the intellect is the superior faculty of knowledge, pertaining directly to divinity, the most intimate to human. And he adds an observation – the term should not be understood in the modern sense (as simply describing a rational activity), but explicitly, as it refers to what one calls spiritual knowledge, beyond the intellectual or psychological sentimentalism. Following the philokalic traditional language, occasionally, one argues that a more suitable translation would be “spirit”, but, in practice, this would bring more confusion, for Isaac also uses the term “spirit” (ܡܫܝܚܐ) in other contexts and sometimes even together with “the intellect”⁶²⁷. Taking into consideration this important aspect, Sabino Chialà, the Italian translator, opts for the term “Intellect”, with capital “I”, so as to avoid confusion with the intellect of the rational process of thinking. Sabino Chialà shows that for Isaac the “Intellect”, in the Evagrian theological line, represents the highest place of human being, almost the inner man, where the Holy Spirit is revealed, works and dwells and it is there where human gets into contact with God⁶²⁸. Some fragments from Isaac’s discourses will be cited below to illustrate the ideas mentioned above.

One of the most relevant paragraphs in this respect can be found in the second centuria of the Second collection. There Isaac speaks about “the revelation of the divine mysteries in

⁶²⁴ S. Brock, “Introduction”, Isaac of Niniveh, *The Second Part. Chapters IV-XLI*, CSCO, vol. 555/225, p. XVII.

⁶²⁵ See S. Brock in Isaac of Niniveh (Isaac the Syrian), *The Second Part. Chapters IV-XLI*, ed. by Sebastian Brock, Lovanii, In aedibus Peeters, CSCO 224, 1995, p. XVII-XVIII; A. Louf in Isaac le Syrien, *Œuvres complètes. 41 Discours récemment découvertes*, Spiritualité Orientale, 81, Abbaye de Bellefontaine, 2003, p. 77-87; A. Louf in Isaac le Syrien, *Œuvres spirituelles d’après un manuscrit récemment découvertes*, Spiritualité Orientale, 88, Abbaye de Bellefontaine, 2009, p. 25-35; S. Chialà, in Isacco di Ninive, *Terza collezione*, edito da Sabino Chialà, Lovanii, In Aedibus Peeters, 2011, CSCO, 346, p. XXVI-XXXIV.

⁶²⁶ For the sake of uniformity, occasionally, we will modify the translations cited in our research so that to be consequent, as follows: hauna – intellect, mad’a – mind, re’yana – thought and tar’itha – thinking.

⁶²⁷ A. Louf in Isaac le Syrien, *Œuvres complètes. 41 Discours récemment découvertes*, p. 78-79.

⁶²⁸ S. Chialà, in Isacco di Ninive, *Terza collezione*, p. XXVI.

the intellect”⁶²⁹, when the process of purification by the work of the Holy Spirit is fulfilled and where the intelligible delight is tasted by those who are progressing in knowledge⁶³⁰. This knowledge is possible through the Holy Spirit who “cloths”⁶³¹ the intellect”. Isaac speaks about the “knowledge of the Spirit”⁶³², “the meditation of the Spirit”⁶³³ and, finally, “the vision of the Spirit”⁶³⁴.

Using an Old Testament imagery, the bishop of Niniveh argues that the intellect is the place where humans can see the spiritual realities, the mysteries of the Spirit⁶³⁵, and he is able to go beyond the Wall of the Holy of Holies, in the “spiritual prayer”⁶³⁶. This is the foretaste and the guarantee of the life to come⁶³⁷. The eschatological aspect of the spiritual knowledge and the role of the Holy Spirit will be an essential element in Isaac’s gnoseological doctrine, as we will detail later on.

The intellect steps on the “divine scales”⁶³⁸ to feel the knowledge of the realities of God⁶³⁹; in the intellect he searches to grasp what is “his nature”⁶⁴⁰, that is his wisdom and the richness of his mysteries”⁶⁴¹. In chapter 71 of the First collection, Isaac conditions the spiritual state of human by the cognitive changes that happen in the intellect: “You canst recognise the degree of thy behaviour, not by the discrimination of the labours, but by the varying states to which the intellect (mind)⁶⁴² is subject. The body is then wont to swim in tears, as the mind (intellect)⁶⁴³ gazes⁶⁴⁴ at spiritual things”^{645,646}.

The intellect is the ultimate forum determining the knowledge – according to the movement taking place in it one can determine the type of certain knowledge. Isaac speaks of

⁶²⁹ ܡܠܟܐ ܕܥܝܠܐ ܕܥܝܠܐ ܕܥܝܠܐ ܕܥܝܠܐ ܕܥܝܠܐ.

⁶³⁰ II, 3,2,14.

⁶³¹ ܕܥܝܠܐ.

⁶³² ܡܠܟܐ ܕܥܝܠܐ; I: 3, p. 30; 34, p. 221; 47, p. 337; 48, p. 445; 57, p. 527; II: 3, 2, 75,85; 18, 16; 39, 18; III: 4, 21; 7,8; 9,18; see also “spiritual knowledge” (ܡܠܟܐ ܕܥܝܠܐ), I: 32, p. 217; 44, p. 318-320; 52, p. 377; 47, p. 473; 56, p. 522; 57, p. 525-527; II: 3,2,75, 77; 3,3,49; 3,4,17.

⁶³³ ܡܠܟܐ ܕܥܝܠܐ; III, 9,18; III, 10,27.

⁶³⁴ ܡܠܟܐ ܕܥܝܠܐ; III, 9,18.

⁶³⁵ ܡܠܟܐ ܕܥܝܠܐ.

⁶³⁶ ܡܠܟܐ ܕܥܝܠܐ.

⁶³⁷ I, 75, p. 349 (B, 519).

⁶³⁸ ܡܠܟܐ ܕܥܝܠܐ III, 3,29; “The ladder unto the kingdom is hidden within thee and within thy soul. Dive into thyself (free) from sin. There thou wilt find steps along thou you canst ascend”/ I, 1, p. 12; 40, p. 306;

⁶³⁹ III, 6,2.

⁶⁴⁰ ܡܠܟܐ ܕܥܝܠܐ.

⁶⁴¹ III, 13,16.

⁶⁴² ܡܠܟܐ.

⁶⁴³ ܡܠܟܐ.

⁶⁴⁴ ܡܠܟܐ.

⁶⁴⁵ ܡܠܟܐ ܕܥܝܠܐ.

⁶⁴⁶ I, 71, p. 330 (B, 492).

the “distraction of mind/ intellect”⁶⁴⁷, specific to the training or instruction, and the “crucifixion of the mind”⁶⁴⁸, which refers to a spiritual knowledge, when the human goes beyond the mundane and gazes at spiritual realities. He encloses within these two types of knowledge three cognitive stages – against nature, natural/ according to nature (worldly knowledge), and a third stage, supernatural (spiritual) knowledge: “one knowledge in these three degrees (natural, praeatural and supernatural). Within these, it is all movement of the intellect⁶⁴⁹ that ascends or descends, moving in good things and between these”⁶⁵⁰.

We can summarize by saying that the intellect is an active faculty that beholds spiritual things, being directly connected to spiritual prayer and able to experience the divine vision. It is the steward of the senses and thoughts and is purified by the divine revelations. It targets the top of ascetical life – the knowledge of God Himself, by the work of the Spirit, who dwells in it. Additionally, it comprises also a deep eschatological connotation.

Related to the first cognitive faculty stands a second term generally translated with “mind” – *ⲙⲁⲛ*. For this reason the Greek translator rendered both of them with a single term, namely *νοῦς*. There are opinions arguing that the first two terms (*hauna* and *mad’a*) refer to what we might call “intuitive knowledge” (spiritual), while the second couple (*re’yana* and *tar’itha*) to the discursive knowledge (intellectual). Actually, in Isaac’s perspective, there are two levels within one general process of knowledge – worldly (natural) and spiritual (theological). However, there is also a lack of consistency between the translators in modern languages: the term “*mad’a*” is rendered either by “intellect”, “mind”, “intelligence”, or by “understanding”. In the current paper, the term “mind” will be employed. Firstly, we will try to point out to the kinship with the previous faculty, applied to the divine knowledge, then to the possible semantic differences between the two.

Isaac defines the mind as “a spiritual sense⁶⁵¹ which is made the recipient of the visual power⁶⁵², as the pupil of the fleshly eyes into which perceptible light is poured”⁶⁵³. Through intellect, the mind goes towards the divine Being and Cause of all. By the discipline of thoughts, the body changes its carnal characteristics and the intellect (*ⲙⲁⲛ*), while being united to the divine essence, “changes abodes and is brought from one to another, not of its

⁶⁴⁷ *ⲙⲁⲛ ⲙⲁⲛⲁⲗⲁⲥ* ; I, 34, p. 151 (B, 223).

⁶⁴⁸ *ⲙⲁⲛ ⲙⲁⲛⲁⲗⲁⲥ* ; I, 34, p. 151 (B, 223).

⁶⁴⁹ *ⲙⲁⲛ ⲙⲁⲛⲁⲗⲁⲥ* ; I, 34, p. 151 (B, 223).

⁶⁵⁰ I, 51, p. 374 (B, 251); one may identify this idea in Evagrius’ thought.

⁶⁵¹ *ⲙⲁⲛ ⲙⲁⲛ* i.

⁶⁵² *ⲙⲁⲛ ⲙⲁⲛ*

⁶⁵³ I, 67, p. 316 (B, 472).

own will. In its course, however, it remains gathered and united to the Divine Essence⁶⁵⁴; and the mind (ܡܢܬܐ) at the end of its course, turns to the first cause and origin”. This aspect stands at the very base of the possibility for human to intuit “something about the divine essence”⁶⁵⁵. It is able to search “in wonder” the mysteries of his nature: “here is nothing which lifts the mind in wonder, beyond all which is visible, to abide with Him far off from the worlds, as searching⁶⁵⁶ the mysteries of His nature”⁶⁵⁷, so that to come closer from “the darkness of ignorance to the truth”⁶⁵⁸. Following the same pattern as in the case of the linguistic analysis of the first faculty, we will emphasise that “the mind” is the faculty able to know the divine mysteries, not intrinsically, but depending on the presence of the Spirit, who “clothes the mind in prayer”⁶⁵⁹. Isaac of Niniveh clearly develops this idea: “la rivelazione relative alla Natura santa e la percezione della contemplazione del mondo futuro... ed altrettali misteri è disegnata nascostamente, entro la nostra mente, dallo Spirito di santità”⁶⁶⁰.

In addition to this first dimension, one can also observe the state in which the mind, as well as the intellect, determines the state of the knowledge. In this sense, Isaac argues that the mind is capable of an earthly, as well as a heavenly knowledge⁶⁶¹. But in order to do that, one requires a discernment to perceive “what is natural and what it comes from the body”⁶⁶², because the purpose that was raised by Incarnation is that of stepping on “the divine scales”⁶⁶³, which go beyond the earthly world. Even the eschatological state is closely linked to the mind, as the resurrection means “the renewal of the mind”⁶⁶⁴, and those who have achieved it, by the exit of the mind beyond the world, rejoice in an ineffable communion with God⁶⁶⁵. The Spirit is the one who, within the intelligible part of the mind – the knowledge of the intelligible things and the enjoyment of silence – makes the human able to taste the life to come⁶⁶⁶.

⁶⁵⁴ ܡܢܬܐ ܡܢ ܡܢܬܐ.

⁶⁵⁵ III, 1,9; Love, as God’s most important attribute, represents the means of approaching and knowing God, not His essence, which is invisible, but by means of his mysteries (III, 1,17).

⁶⁵⁶ ܡܢܬܐ Investigation not of His nature/ Essence, but of the mysteries of his nature. One can identify here the difference between God’s transcendence and immanence (I: 5, p. 72; 51, p. 367-368; II: 10,4,14,28,45; 35,5; 39,7; III: 3, 35; 7,5; 9, 8-9).

⁶⁵⁷ ܡܢܬܐ ܡܢ ܡܢܬܐ ; III, 1,16.

⁶⁵⁸ ܡܢܬܐ ܡܢ ܡܢܬܐ ܡܢ ܡܢܬܐ ܡܢ ܡܢܬܐ ; II, 3,3,52.

⁶⁵⁹ III, 3,13.

⁶⁶⁰ ܡܢܬܐ ܡܢ ܡܢܬܐ ܡܢ ܡܢܬܐ ܡܢ ܡܢܬܐ ; II, 3,3,56.

⁶⁶¹ III, 3,18.

⁶⁶² III, 3,25.

⁶⁶³ ܡܢܬܐ ܡܢ ܡܢܬܐ.

⁶⁶⁴ III, 9,3; see also I, 35,p. 246; 46, p. 469; II, 3,4,54; III, 9,1.

⁶⁶⁵ ܡܢܬܐ ܡܢ ܡܢܬܐ; III, 6, 48, 51.

⁶⁶⁶ III, 9,31.

In the analysis of the second term (mad'a), we followed the same paradigm as in the case of the former one (hauna). The conclusion one can draw shows that the two terms are used to refer mostly to the same state, the one we have called “spiritual knowledge” or “intuitive knowledge”. It is necessary however to observe the distinctions that exist between these two terms, because, although there is a certain fluidity in Isaac’s writings, the use of the two terms to express the same cognitive faculty implies two relatively distinct dimensions. Sabino Chialà defines “mind” (mad'a) as the faculty where the process of thinking occurs⁶⁶⁷. Another perspective is that of André Louf, who argues that “the mind is the faculty of knowing, which receives material, immaterial and spiritual impulses⁶⁶⁸. On the same line, Dana Miller advocates that “mad'a”, taking into consideration its etymology, is the faculty of knowing; it is the pupil of spiritual eyes, whereas the faculty that allows these pupils to see is “hauna”. If we join the two faculties in one, we arrive at the Greek νοῦς⁶⁶⁹. He adds that, although this distinction is obvious, Isaac occasionally employs the first term where it would be natural to use the second and vice versa. The idea of the relative fluidity Sebastian Brock talked about occurs here.

The difference between the first two terms, united into the Greek νοῦς, and the third – ܡܕܝܐ⁶⁷⁰ – mind⁶⁷¹ / thinking is apparently obvious. According to Professor Dana Miller, the latter one⁶⁷² is a “man’s faculty of conscious thinking and cogitation which he employs continuously for deliberating and reflecting”. There are some examples where we can identify this distinction. For example, in the 22nd discourse of the First collection, we read: “the intellect (ܡܕܝܐ), the governour of the senses, the daring spirit (ܡܕܝܐ)⁶⁷³, that swift bird”⁶⁷⁴, or “those solitaries who have earnestly chosen to be free from the world in body and in spirit (ܡܕܝܐ) in order to establish in their mind (ܡܕܝܐ) the prayer of solitude”⁶⁷⁵. The same relation also regarding the term “mind” (ܡܕܝܐ) – the release of any worldly thoughts leads to purity of mind: “It makes the soul as if insane with joy, freeing it entirely in the mind’s (ܡܕܝܐ) flight to

⁶⁶⁷ Sabino Chialà, “Introduzione”, Isacco di Ninive, *Terza collezione*, p. XXVI.

⁶⁶⁸ André Louf, “Introduction”, Isaac le Syrien, *Oeuvres spirituelles II*, p. 84.

⁶⁶⁹ “Introduction”, *Ascetical Homilies*, p. cix.

⁶⁷⁰ Gr. διάνοια.

⁶⁷¹ S. Brock employs the same term either for “mad'a”, or “re'yana” (S. Brock in Isaac of Niniveh, *The Second Part. Chapters IV-XLI*, p. XVII).

⁶⁷² He translates it with “mind”.

⁶⁷³ Thinking.

⁶⁷⁴ I, 22, p. 112 (B, 165).

⁶⁷⁵ I, 18, p. 100 (B, 148).

make it a sharer with that One who is above all, while nothing at all is mingled with the mind (ܡܢܐ)”.⁶⁷⁶

We understand that the faculty of “thought” is mobile, changeable, by means of thoughts, either to the world or to those heavenly, when it is unified. Isaac asserts that, in the first case, the thought “wanders”⁶⁷⁷ through carnal and worldly thoughts. From this perspective, spiritual warfare involves an escape from the mundane, at the level of thought, by Scripture reading⁶⁷⁸, meditation on God’s laws⁶⁷⁹, pure prayer⁶⁸⁰ and, in general, any ascetic work that will lead to “the unification of thought”⁶⁸¹ or, more suggestive, “unique/unified thought”⁶⁸², fixing the thought in God⁶⁸³. In this case, where thought is also able to ascend to the heavenly, it apparently refers to a discursive knowledge rather than an intuitive one.

Speaking about the three stages of spiritual life, the bishop of Niniveh affirms: “The way of life is the body, prayer is the soul, but the vision of the thought”⁶⁸⁴ is of the spiritual order. Vision of the thought⁶⁸⁵, I call revelation of hidden things⁶⁸⁶, and the understanding of incorporeal things⁶⁸⁷, and that certain understanding which is ‘given’ by the Spirit^{688,689}.

This is why an earlier statement referred to the fact that the distinction between this last term and the other two analysed above is “seemingly” obvious. This idea is supported by the way in which Sabino Chialà defines the latter term (ܡܢܐ) as to the power/organ of thinking, in most situations, and in others, as the effect, the result of thinking itself⁶⁹⁰. For this reason it renders it either with “pensiero” or “opinione”, depending on the context. André Louf states that “re’yana” is the place of the intellectual activity with an important role in the elementary stage of spiritual life, before the “intellect” (hauna) is attracted to stupor before the divine mysteries⁶⁹¹. We note that this view goes in the direction we have mentioned at the beginning, that of Professor Miller – “re’yana” refers to a primary and elementary knowledge, which

⁶⁷⁶ III, 1,13.

⁶⁷⁷ II, 3.4,42.

⁶⁷⁸ II, 3.2,60.

⁶⁷⁹ II, 3.3,11.

⁶⁸⁰ II, 3.3,42.

⁶⁸¹ II, 3.4,34.

⁶⁸² ܡܢܐ ܡܢܐ ܡܢܐ ; II, 3.4,53.

⁶⁸³ III, 4,6.

⁶⁸⁴ ܡܢܐ ܡܢܐ ܡܢܐ.

⁶⁸⁵ See also (ܡܢܐ ܡܢܐ ܡܢܐ): I, 4, p. 34-35 (B, 49); II, 14,2; or vision of the intellect (ܡܢܐ ܡܢܐ): II, 18,4; III, 13,22.

⁶⁸⁶ ܡܢܐ ܡܢܐ ܡܢܐ.

⁶⁸⁷ ܡܢܐ ܡܢܐ ܡܢܐ ܡܢܐ.

⁶⁸⁸ ܡܢܐ ܡܢܐ ܡܢܐ ܡܢܐ ܡܢܐ.

⁶⁸⁹ III, 9,5.

⁶⁹⁰ Sabino Chialà, „Introduzione”, in Isacco di Ninive, *Terza collezione*, p. XXVI.

⁶⁹¹ André Louf, „Introduction”, in Isaac le Syrien, *Oeuvres spirituelles II*, p. 79, 84.

precedes the spiritual knowledge of divine mysteries in the “intellect” and “mind”. And yet, one can identify the direct dependence of the activity of the three faculties – purity of thought (re’yana) of all worldly (passionate thoughts as well as those called positive thoughts) up to unification, ensures the necessary space for the “intellect” (hauna) and “mind” (mad’a) to be able to go beyond the worldly things to the heavenly ones. The paragraph below pictures this close relationship:

Doest thou find with absolute certainty, that the deliberations⁶⁹² have become clear? Does distraction desist from the mind (ܡܕܐ) at the time of prayer? Which affection troubles thee when the thought (ܚܝܐ) approaches unto prayer? Does thou perceive that the power of solitude envelops with the quiet and unusual peace which it engenders in the thought (ܚܝܐ)? Is the intellect (ܚܘܡܐ) continually snatched away spontaneously, by immaterial emotions, towards those things it is not allowed to interpret to the senses?... Does there constantly flow from the heart (ܠܒܐ) some enjoyments which develop the whole being in rapture without thy perceiving it?⁶⁹³

At a careful reading of the paragraph above one can discern the dynamism of the process of knowledge involving all three gnoseological faculties analysed up to now, plus the heart. The first step is the cleansing of thoughts, which is done, as we have already pointed out above, by “forgetting the world” and the fixation of the thought (re’yana) in God. In this way, the thought is overshadowed by the peace from above, and the mind (mad’a) is no longer dissipated. Finally, this creates the necessary space for the intellect (hauna) to experience the rapture/ the ecstasy (better, the enstasy). The result, at the level of heart (leba), is the sweetness of the Holy Spirit, which attracts human altogether.

We will continue with the fourth gnoseological faculty, closely related to the previous one –ܚܝܐܝܐ (thinking/ intelligence)⁶⁹⁴. Things get complicated at this level. There is no unanimity regarding the rendering of this faculty into modern languages. Moreover, it seems that this term engendered most numerous translation variants. Sabino Chialà advocates that the term indicates “understanding something” and he translates it with “intelligenza”⁶⁹⁵. Professor Miller interprets this faculty into two ways: either supposed to mean what is going on within the thought or the appearance of one’s thoughts (mentality) or a type of “reservoir” of these thoughts⁶⁹⁶, and usually translates it with “thinking”. In order to justify his choice he quotes Isaac’s following paragraph: “Purity of soul is freedom from the secret passions

⁶⁹² ܚܘܡܐ.

⁶⁹³ I, 70, p. 326 (B, 486).

⁶⁹⁴ Gr. φρόνημα.

⁶⁹⁵ Sabino Chialà, “Introduzione”, Isacco di Ninive, *Terza collezione*, p. XXVI.

⁶⁹⁶ Cf. *The Ascetical Homilies of Saint Isaac the Syrian*, p. cviii-cvix.

concentrated in one's thinking (ܠܚܝܬܐ)⁶⁹⁷. Isaac talks about “carnal intelligence/ understanding”⁶⁹⁸ or “childish intelligence”⁶⁹⁹ that needs to be cleansed by reading the Scripture⁷⁰⁰, meditation⁷⁰¹, prayer⁷⁰² and the remembrance of God⁷⁰³ within himself, to “go beyond oneself”⁷⁰⁴, to achieve limpidity⁷⁰⁵, to follow it through the thought (ܠܚܝܬܐ) of the Holy Spirit⁷⁰⁶, becoming itself heaven⁷⁰⁷.

In this case too, the tripartite evolution inherited from John the Solitary is visible, as Isaac speaks about the “carnal intelligence”⁷⁰⁸, “psychical intelligence” (of the soul⁷⁰⁹) and “spiritual intelligence”⁷¹⁰. Despite its preponderant use when it comes to discursive knowledge, thinking/ intelligence is also connected with the after death state, as a gift of the Spirit, when all will understand the mystery of the unity of all accomplished in the Incarnation of Christ⁷¹¹.

The following cited paragraph quotes “thinking” next to two other faculties –intellect and mind – in an attempt to identify its specificity. Isaac shows that while the “intellect” enters into the supernatural motion⁷¹², the “mind”, far away from the world, experiences stupor. And this is due to the “limpidity of intelligence/ thinking”: “the ‘intellect’ (ܠܡܝܬܐ) penetrates what is above nature... the mind (ܠܡܝܬܐ) is lifted from the passions and the battles,

⁶⁹⁷ In Wensinck: “Psychic purity is to be free from hidden affections in the spirit” (I, 40, p. 204/ B, 306).

⁶⁹⁸ ܠܚܝܬܐ ; II, 3.2,25.

⁶⁹⁹ ܠܚܝܬܐ ܠܚܝܬܐ ; III, 4,9; See also I, 51, p. 361; II, 24, 5; II, 39, 17; Similar expression: ܠܚܝܬܐ ܠܚܝܬܐ (ܠܚܝܬܐ ܠܚܝܬܐ): I, 76, p. 527, 529; II, 39,2; with ܠܚܝܬܐ : II, 14,39; 39,14; with ܠܚܝܬܐ: II,8,9.

⁷⁰⁰ ܠܚܝܬܐ.

⁷⁰¹ ܠܚܝܬܐ.

⁷⁰² ܠܚܝܬܐ ; II, 3.1,63.

⁷⁰³ ܠܚܝܬܐ ܠܚܝܬܐ ; III, 8,1.

⁷⁰⁴ III, 1,8 ܠܚܝܬܐ – migration refers both to separation from the world as well as from the body. It has physical connotations as well as interior ones. Isaac defines the concept: “No one is able to come near to God save only he who is far from the world. For I do not call separation (ܠܚܝܬܐ) the departure from the body, but from the bodily things”. See also I, 2, p. 12, 15; I, 2, p. 25,28; II, 3, 2.5; II, 3.22; II, 3.4,66; II, 8,13; II, 10, 26; II, 20, 8, 20; III, 12, 1-4. Synonym expressions: ܠܚܝܬܐ III, 6, 51; ܠܚܝܬܐ (transmigration) III, 3,18. Evagrius lists four types of migration (KG, II. 4).

⁷⁰⁵ ܠܚܝܬܐ ; III, 13,11; It designates the highest form of purity, the original state of the soul. Brock identifies the origin of this expression at John the Solitary (S. Brock, *Isaac of Nineveh (Isaac the Syrian). ‘The Second Part’, Chapters IV-XLI*, p. 29-30; John the Solitary – S. Dederling, *Johannes von Lykopolis. Ein dialog über die seele un die Affekte des Menschen*, Leiden, 1936, p. 6); See also I, 76, p. 526; II, 3.2,38; II, 3.4,33; the limpidity of mind (ܠܚܝܬܐ) I, 15, p. 128; II, 22, 7; the limpidity of thinking (ܠܚܝܬܐ) I, 9, p. 113; I, 27, p. 527; II, 3.2,31; II, 3.4,72. For details see G. Bunge, “Le « lieu de la limpidité ». A propos d’un apophtegme énigmatique: Budge II, 494, in *Irenikon*, 1 (1982), p. 7-18.

⁷⁰⁶ III, 4,31.

⁷⁰⁷ III, 8,17; See also III, 8,1; cf. Nil the Solitary – P. Bettio (ed.), *Gli scritti siriaci di Nilo il Solitario. Perle 2*, Louvain-la-Neuve, 1983, p. 10.

⁷⁰⁸ ܠܚܝܬܐ.

⁷⁰⁹ ܠܚܝܬܐ.

⁷¹⁰ ܠܚܝܬܐ ; II, 3.3,51.

⁷¹¹ III, 5,10.

⁷¹² ܠܚܝܬܐ ; See the threefold spiritual knowledge: natural, against nature and supernatural.

likewise from labor, ... This takes place in freedom from all the things of this life and in limpidity of the intelligence^{713,714}.

The text cited above suggests that all these faculties participate in what we call supernatural knowledge or spiritual knowledge: the cleansed and limpid thinking makes the mind go beyond passions and the intellect to overcome the flesh, penetrating the things of the Spirit.

The following passage reunites all four noetic faculties in order to identify the connections between them and the differences that individualize the process of knowledge: “For the (vigil) is the light of the thinking (ܠܚܝܬܐ). By it the mind (ܠܡܢܐ) is elevated and the thought (ܠܚܝܬܐ) concentrated, the intellect (ܠܡܢܐ) flies (on high) and gazes at spiritual things and becomes young and illuminated in prayer”⁷¹⁵. This passage seems to clearly identify the role of each noetic faculty in the process of knowledge. Starting in reverse order of the analysis that we have done above, it may be asserted that in Isaac’s vision, through clear “thinking” (ܠܚܝܬܐ), generated by the vigil and, generally, by the ascetic endeavour, the thought (ܠܚܝܬܐ) becomes unified, “the mind/understanding” (ܠܡܢܐ) rises, and the “intellect” (ܠܡܢܐ) shines, rejuvenates and stretches toward the spiritual things.

Following this philological analysis, despite that flexibility in terms that we mentioned at the beginning, one can advocate the idea that the last two terms – “thought” and “thinking/intelligence” – refer mostly to a natural (discursive) knowledge, while the first two – the “intellect” and the “mind” – to an upper cognitive stage, an intuitive/spiritual knowledge.

In the second part of this chapter we will focus on some other key terms around the process of knowledge, which will enable a more accurate understanding of the gnoseological itinerary Isaac of Niniveh describes. The following terms do not imply same degree of difficulty as those discussed above, but still require some individualization and contextual explanations.

4.3 Secondary terms

The first term that we will refer to, in connection with the “thought” (re’yono) is ܠܚܝܬܐ. Usually used in plural, it was translated into Greek by λογισμοι. In the spiritual life, it often has a negative connotation. It has been argued that it is closely associated with the faculty of “thought” (ܠܚܝܬܐ) that is the process, while the “thoughts” its effect or outcome. For this

⁷¹³ ܠܚܝܬܐ ܠܚܝܬܐ.

⁷¹⁴ III, 13, 11.

⁷¹⁵ I, 80, p. 375 (B, 560).

reason, both Chialà and Louf use many terms to render its meaning as accurately as possible, depending on the context: idea, opinion, intention, project or temptation.

The thoughts also have an important role in the spiritual knowledge. Ascetic labor envisages firstly the purification of thoughts in order to achieve the unity of mind up to reaching its indwelling into the heavenly things. A few examples will be given to support this idea. The thoughts dwell in human's "thought" (ܬܚܬܐ)⁷¹⁶. In consequence, human cannot approach God until this faculty is not purified from sinful impulses. In the third centuria we read the following admonition: "Manda la tua mente/ thought (ܬܚܬܐ) dai pensieri corporei"⁷¹⁷ per gustare quella soavità che non cade sotto composizione di lingua"⁷¹⁸. The purification of thoughts, which is done by abandoning the world and unification of thoughts⁷¹⁹, brings the light of thinking/intelligence (ܬܚܬܐ)⁷²⁰. A purified thinking does not mean the lack of thought, which is naturally impossible, but freedom from them. In the First collection, the first discourse, Isaac clearly explains this idea: "Not that one is chased⁷²¹ from whom evil impulses that intended to combat him are withheld, but he whose uprightness of heart renders chase the gaze of his mind⁷²², so that he does not audaciously enter upon lascivious thoughts"⁷²³.

The eschatological state is directly related to the movement that is taking place in the noetic faculty. In this frame, in the Evagrian line⁷²⁴, Isaac lists among the utmost important ascetic labors, as a continuation of the purification of thinking, the reflection on the heavenly things, which can be done only after carnal thoughts disappear or at least decrease at the level of thinking. The renewal of the inner man⁷²⁵ consists in meditation⁷²⁶ and constant reflection⁷²⁷ on the things to come that brings human to purification of earthly impulses. Accordingly, as much as the thought is purified of bodily thoughts⁷²⁸ the reflection on

⁷¹⁶ II, III,4.49.

⁷¹⁷ ܬܚܬܐ ܬܚܬܐ.

⁷¹⁸ II, III,3,27.

⁷¹⁹ II, III,4,48.

⁷²⁰ I, II, p. 12 (B, 17).

⁷²¹ ܬܚܬܐ / σῶφρον.

⁷²² ܬܚܬܐ ܬܚܬܐ.

⁷²³ ܬܚܬܐ ܬܚܬܐ ; I, I, p. 3 (B, 4).

⁷²⁴ II, VIII,15 (*Capita cognoscitiva* 99 in J. Muyldermans (ed.), "Evagre le Pontique: les capita cognoscitiva dans le versions syriaque et arménienne", *Le Muséon*, 47 (1934,) p. 73-106, p. 99).

⁷²⁵ ܬܚܬܐ ܬܚܬܐ.

⁷²⁶ ܬܚܬܐ.

⁷²⁷ ܬܚܬܐ.

⁷²⁸ ܬܚܬܐ ܬܚܬܐ ܬܚܬܐ.

heavenly⁷²⁹ things may spring out, giving to the mind the possibility to gaze on the things to come⁷³⁰.

So, thoughts are movements within “the thought”, oriented either towards the earthly or the heavenly things. Their existence is strictly bound to what is called discursive knowledge, natural knowledge, but they also condition the entrance into the spiritual state, when, according to Isaac, there is no movement of any kind, including that of thoughts.

Another spiritual faculty, particularly important in Isaac mystical system, this time on the line of John the Solitary and Pseudo Macarius, is the heart (قلب)⁷³¹. The bishop of Niniveh defines it as the spiritual center of the human that embraces and encompasses all other faculties in the field of spiritual knowledge. This is clearly expressed by Isaac when comparing it with “re’yana”: “The thought (فكر) is one of the senses of the soul. The heart (قلب) is the *central organ of the inner senses*⁷³², because it is the root”⁷³³.

Isaac goes further and argues that the heart represents the boundary between the senses of the body and those of the soul, ruling both of them. It is “in the middle between psychical⁷³⁴ and bodily⁷³⁵ apperceptions; to the former it belongs organically⁷³⁶, to the latter naturally⁷³⁷. And the recipient directs the taste of its actions towards both sides”⁷³⁸. The journey starts with the purification from the passions and bodily thoughts⁷³⁹, but achieves its perfection by God’s grace, in the spiritual stage⁷⁴⁰, when it becomes the altar of God⁷⁴¹. In the heart occurs the remembrance of the Resurrection and Judgement and the future life⁷⁴² and here one may even experience some apperceptions of the knowledge of the future order⁷⁴³. Based on this, one can argue that the heart is the faculty that integrates all other cognitive faculties and fully participates in the spiritual knowledge. We cannot confine it to a sense, as might contemporary psychology allege, but it is the superior human spiritual function, lectured as a link between the material and the spiritual dimension, between body and soul,

⁷²⁹ *ḥayyūnān* *ḥayyūnān*.

⁷³⁰ *ḥayyūnān* *ḥayyūnān*; II, 8, 16.

⁷³¹ On the role of the heart in spiritual life see Antoine Guillaumont, “Les sens des noms du coeur dans l’antiquité”, in *Le coeur (Etudes carmélitaines)*, Paris, 1950, p. 41-81.

⁷³² *ḥayyūnān* *ḥayyūnān*.

⁷³³ I, 3, p. 20 (B, 29).

⁷³⁴ Literally – of the soul: *ḥayyūnān* *ḥayyūnān*.

⁷³⁵ Of the body – *ḥayyūnān* *ḥayyūnān*.

⁷³⁶ *ḥayyūnān* *ḥayyūnān*.

⁷³⁷ *ḥayyūnān*.

⁷³⁸ I, 33, p. 148 (B, 219).

⁷³⁹ I, 1, p. 4-5 (B, 5-6).

⁷⁴⁰ II, 3, 4, 15.

⁷⁴¹ I, 22, p. 113 (B, 167); III, 14, 5.

⁷⁴² I, 65, p. 297 (B, 443).

⁷⁴³ I, 65, p. 304 (B, 454).

and, especially, between man and God. Therefore, the last stage before entering the kingdom of heaven's delights is achieving a pure heart⁷⁴⁴ that is the completion of a holistic process⁷⁴⁵. Isaac describes this limit, in a language similar to that describing the purification of mind, not being totally without thoughts, reflection or stirring, but free of all evil and favourable to everything⁷⁴⁶, having the same attitude as God has⁷⁴⁷. In this way, it becomes what Isaac calls "an intelligible altar"⁷⁴⁸ of God.

We will now turn to another cognitive faculty that relates directly to the intellectual sphere, rendered this time unanimously by "conscience"⁷⁴⁹. This is the inner forum that makes human responsible⁷⁵⁰, but also generates the audacity towards God, as a result of sincerity, humility and trust that the human achieves⁷⁵¹ in the grace of faith⁷⁵². A right conscience is given by a pure prayer⁷⁵³, and, eventually, purity and limpidity are not simply the result of human action, but rather, the effect of the work of God's grace (grace of faith)⁷⁵⁴. Conscience stands at the very base of the spiritual progress⁷⁵⁵.

4.4 Forms of Knowledge

In the fourth part of this chapter we will refer to certain forms of experiential knowledge present in Isaac's discourses, which are part of his regular language to express the dynamism of spiritual life.

The first concept, of fundamental importance for his theological system, is the term that was inherited from the Byzantine Mystics – θεωρία⁷⁵⁶, simply transliterated into Syriac language. Isaac borrows this term from the mystical language of Evagrius and Dionysius⁷⁵⁷, since Syriac writers do not normally employ it. Professor Sebastian Brock argues that this term only appears in those authors who have known and used the Syriac writings of Evagrius,

⁷⁴⁴ ܐܠܗܐ ܕܠܒ; See this concept also at Evagrius, KG IV.33, 49, 52.

⁷⁴⁵ I, 3, p. 20 (B, 29).

⁷⁴⁶ See also I, 35, p. 168 (B, 250).

⁷⁴⁷ II, 15,2.

⁷⁴⁸ ܐܠܬܐܪܬܐ ܕܠܒ; I, 22, p. 113 (B, 167).

⁷⁴⁹ ܐܠܡܝܢܐ.

⁷⁵⁰ II, 18,9.

⁷⁵¹ II, 37, 1-2; III, 2,6.

⁷⁵² III, 6,7.

⁷⁵³ II, 3,4,73.

⁷⁵⁴ III, 6,8-9.

⁷⁵⁵ I, 36, p. 279; I, 59, p. 418; III, 6, 11-12; III, 7, 23.

⁷⁵⁶ ܐܠܡܝܢܐ.

⁷⁵⁷ See S. Brock, "Discerning the Evagrian in the writings of Isaac of Niniveh: a preliminary investigation", *Adamantius*, 15 (2009), p. 62-63, 66-67; Idem, "Some Uses of the Therm *theoria* in the Writings of Isaac of Niniveh", *Parole de l'Orient*, 20 (1995-6), p. 407-419.

from John the Solitary onwards⁷⁵⁸. In the modern translations, the term is rendered either by “theoria” itself, by contemplation (Sebastian Brock) or “divine vision” (Dana Miller). Isaac himself explains the terms to his readers as “vision of the spirit”⁷⁵⁹, or “non apperceptible mental”⁷⁶⁰ revelation⁷⁶¹, “apprehension of the divine mysteries”⁷⁶² which are hidden in the things spoken⁷⁶³. In this frame, some of the Western translators, opting for the term “contemplation”, are forced to acknowledge its inability to play the entire contents of the original term. For instance, André Louf claims that “theoria” Isaac speaks about refers to the highest stage of spiritual knowledge, while “contemplation” presupposes human’s ascetical labour of the noetic faculty⁷⁶⁴. Dana Miller continues this analysis and states “contemplation” bears a deep psychological connotation, referring to the creation of images in the imagination or reflections, in connection to specific meditations on creation and the divine things, while “theoria” describes the work of the Spirit in the intellect, which makes human deepen the mysteries of God and creation, hidden to the rational human mind. He calls this knowledge supra-conceptual and defines it as revelation from above. For this reason he renders the term “theoria” by “divine vision”⁷⁶⁵. Placide Deseille tries to describes this concept by using J. Maritain’s phrase “knowledge by connaturality”, having as starting point Isaac’s description as “divine vision in the mirror of human’s soul”, a concept familiar to some other Church writers, in particular Gregory of Nyssa⁷⁶⁶. The soul is able to know God by going deep into itself, as within it one identifies the divine image. To do that a purification of the intellect is also deemed necessary. In consequence, love is intellection. In Isaac’s case, this connaturality of the soul with God (not in a platonic sense) resides in the love of the neighbour, up to adopting his suffering, as well as his corrupted state⁷⁶⁷. Finally, he defines it as intuitive and

⁷⁵⁸ S. Brock, *Some Uses of the Term „theoria”*, p. 407-408

⁷⁵⁹ ܐܘܪܝܐ ܕܪܫܝܐ ; “spiritual sight” (Wensinck); I, 35, p. 175 (B, 260).

⁷⁶⁰ Literally – “of the intellect”.

⁷⁶¹ ܕܡܝܫܬܐ ܕܡܝܫܬܐ ܕܡܝܫܬܐ ; I, 20, p. 109 (B, 161).

⁷⁶² ܕܡܝܫܬܐ ܕܡܝܫܬܐ ܕܡܝܫܬܐ .

⁷⁶³ I, 2, p. 12 (B, 17).

⁷⁶⁴ “Contemplation n’est pas le sommet de l’expérience spirituelle, mais *un regard* de plus en plus pénétrant à la fois sur le sens spirituel des réalité créées et sur celles de Dieu. Elle est souvent accordée à partir des Ecritures, ou grâce à quelque réflexion ou méditation sur les mystères de la Création et du Dessein du salut. Tous les sens spirituels ou intérieurs sont ainsi appelés à *contempler*, chacun selon ses particularités : l’entendement, la Pensée, la conscience, et finalement l’Intellect en lequel la contemplation trouve son accomplissement et est rendue parfaite dans un regard ou une vision immatériels” (André Louf, „Introduction”, Isaac le syrien, *Oeuvres spirituelles II*, p. 83).

⁷⁶⁵ Cf. Dana Miller, “Translator’s Introduction”, *The Ascetical Homilies of Saint Isaac the Syrian*, p. cx-cxi.

⁷⁶⁶ For details see Jean Daniélou, *Platonisme et théologie mystique*, Paris, 1944, p. 211.

⁷⁶⁷ P. Deseille, “Introduction”, Saint Isaac le syrien, *Discours ascétiques*, Monastère Saint-Antoine-le-Grand, Monastère de Solan, 2011, p. 48-49.

delightful perception of the divine realities by the hidden eyes of the heart, in the grace of the Spirit, a lively communion with them⁷⁶⁸.

We are now going to identify how Isaac himself describes this cognitive form, which is named by the term “theoria”. Perhaps the most suggestive text where he deals with this concept is the excerpt from the First collection, the 35th discourse, where, while describing the spiritual prayer, he defines the experience of “theoria”. He argues that

(Spiritual prayer) is psychic impulses which partake of the influence of the Holy Spirit, on account of veracious purity... it is a symbol of the future way of existence, for nature is elevated and exempt from all the impulses from the recollection of things in this world. It does not pray, but the soul perceives the spiritual things of the world beyond (which is something greater than the mind⁷⁶⁹ of man); the understanding⁷⁷⁰ of these is kindled by spiritual force; it is inner sight⁷⁷¹ and not the impulse and the beseeching of prayer... and from there it will conduct them by contemplation⁷⁷², which is interpreted spiritual sight^{773 774}.

Isaac also speaks about “angelic theoria”⁷⁷⁵ and the “heavenly theoria”⁷⁷⁶, when the intellect is moved without senses by the spiritual powers. And finally, “theoria” generically describes the stage of spiritual living, characterized by the participation in the kingdom of God or the experience of eschaton already on earth⁷⁷⁷. It can be inferred that “theoria” is the anticipatory knowledge of the life to come. Isaac actually describes what happens in that state, when the intellect becomes naked and the mind rises above the worldly things and experiences the vision of those immaterial, which runs without the senses, and the hypostatic vision and stupor of God. The bishop of Niniveh calls this “monadic”⁷⁷⁸ knowledge”. A brief excerpt will be quoted on this theme to render in detail this transformation. If bodily conduct

⁷⁶⁸ P. Deseille, “Introduction”, p. 56.

⁷⁶⁹ Դիւան.

⁷⁷⁰ Դիւան.

⁷⁷¹ Դիւան Դիւան.

⁷⁷² Դիւան.

⁷⁷³ Դիւան Դիւան.

⁷⁷⁴ I, 35, p. 174-175 (B, 160).

⁷⁷⁵ Դիւան Դիւան ; II, 3.3,90; The angels fills human with “spiritual visions” (Դիւան Դիւան) – Evagrius, *Praktikos* 76 –, illuminations (Դիւան), intuitions and contemplations of all kind (Դիւան Դիւան Դիւան), II, 3.3,92.

⁷⁷⁶ Դիւան Դիւան ; I, 43, p. 345 (B, 307).

⁷⁷⁷ One can observe that the concept follows for Isaac two qualitative stages, one pointing to the anthropological primate, while the other to the divine intervention. To point to this difference, occasionally we will use “contemplation” for the first stage, and “theoria” for the second one.

⁷⁷⁸ Unitary.

purifies the body from material elements⁷⁷⁹, mental discipline purifies the soul from material impulses⁷⁸⁰ and changes their affectible nature into motions of contemplation⁷⁸¹. And this

will bring the soul near to the nakedness of the mind⁷⁸² that is called immaterial contemplation⁷⁸³; this is spiritual discipline⁷⁸⁴. It elevates the intellect (ܐܠܗܐ) above earthly things and brings it near to the primordial spiritual contemplation⁷⁸⁵; it directs the intellect (ܐܠܗܐ) towards God by the sight⁷⁸⁶ of unspeakable glory and it delights spiritually in the hope of future things... Spiritual discipline is service without the senses...when the mind of saints was given with personal contemplation⁷⁸⁷ and further sight⁷⁸⁸ will be spiritual⁷⁸⁹ sight... from there one easily is moved onwards toward what is called solitary knowledge⁷⁹⁰, which is ecstasy⁷⁹¹ in God; this is the order of that high future state that will be given... after resurrection⁷⁹².

From the text above, one can make some general observations around this concept. Firstly, “theoria” refers to the spiritual conduct, when both intellect and mind are purified and above earthly things. Isaac joins the attribute “immaterial”, as referring to the noetic faculties as well as to the absence of any material thoughts. Successively, he underlines that “theoria” is of the Spirit, indicating the source, and adds the attribute “primordial”, which probably refers to an originary state⁷⁹³. This spiritual theoria means partaking God’s ineffable glory⁷⁹⁴ and the spiritual delights are seen as anticipation of the life after resurrection. One can identify here the eschatological character of Syriac mystics. The highest form of theoria is the “monadic knowledge”⁷⁹⁵, described as stupor⁷⁹⁶ in God, which is at the top of spiritual life in Isaac’s perspective.

⁷⁷⁹ By bodily labours, personal work.

⁷⁸⁰ It is the work of the heart, the incessantly meditation on the judgement and providence, incessant prayer of heart and the domain of inner affections.

⁷⁸¹ ܐܠܗܐ ܐܠܗܐ ܐܠܗܐ.

⁷⁸² ܐܠܗܐ ܐܠܗܐ ܐܠܗܐ.

⁷⁸³ ܐܠܗܐ ܐܠܗܐ ܐܠܗܐ.

⁷⁸⁴ ܐܠܗܐ ܐܠܗܐ.

⁷⁸⁵ ܐܠܗܐ ܐܠܗܐ ܐܠܗܐ.

⁷⁸⁶ ܐܠܗܐ.

⁷⁸⁷ ܐܠܗܐ ܐܠܗܐ ; Concerning the primordial creation of nature.

⁷⁸⁸ ܐܠܗܐ.

⁷⁸⁹ ܐܠܗܐ.

⁷⁹⁰ ܐܠܗܐ ܐܠܗܐ; in Evagrian terms – monadic knowledge.

⁷⁹¹ ܐܠܗܐ.

⁷⁹² I, 50, p. 202-203 (B, 303-304).

⁷⁹³ Despite the fact that Isaac does not support the idea of perfection in Paradise.

⁷⁹⁴ Salient theme of the theological contemporary dispute.

⁷⁹⁵ Solitary, unitary.

⁷⁹⁶ Wensinck translates “temha” with “ecstasy”, but, as we will detail later on, more proper is stupor/ wonder, as Isaac does not really accept the concept ecstasy, but more enstasy.

Another form of knowledge, related to the previous one, is what Isaac calls “vision”⁷⁹⁷ in connection with “revelation”⁷⁹⁸, sometimes regarded as synonymous, both referring to an immediate contact with heavenly realities. There is still one semantic difference highlighted by the author. The revelation, a larger concept which encompasses the vision, is always colligated with the intelligible things and achieved by the mind, while the vision is colligated more with the senses and occurs in similitudes. The latter one is achieved in the depth of sleep or in the state of wakefulness, sometimes clearly, other times dimly, as a voice or symbolic representations, as a clear apparition, sight or speech⁷⁹⁹. But the revelations occur only to the initiated and perfect.

Thus, “revelation” is greater than “vision” since it refers to the inner mystical experience, involving the spiritual-cognitive faculties, while the latter refers to the revelation of the immaterial world (angels, saints). As in the case of “theoria”, “revelation” means participation in the kingdom of heaven, the new reality⁸⁰⁰ and is described as wonder before the Divine Nature⁸⁰¹. Isaac identifies two types of revelations colligated to the new reality: about the New World – which concern the wondrous transformation that creation will experience, revealed to the intellect by various insights⁸⁰², as the result of continual reflection on them and, consequently, illumination –, and of the New World, which concern the divine nature of the divine majesty. The first category of revelations comes close to what Isaac calls vision. This common territory is also suggested when he speaks about revelations with images for simple people⁸⁰³ and without images for perfect people, but by intelligible apperceptions⁸⁰⁴. Again the former category can only give a sense about divine action, but it is not the exact truth, while the latter, by means of insights, points to the knowledge of the divine nature.

From a semantical point of view, very close to the two terms analysed above and mostly used in plural, there is also what Isaac calls *هتدله* – insights. The translators have faced difficulty when trying to render this term into a modern language, because, in fact, it embraces a whole semantic spectrum, such as: intuition, sense, understanding, not referring to

⁷⁹⁷ *هتدله*.

⁷⁹⁸ *هتدله*.

⁷⁹⁹ I, 35, p. 167-168 (B, 249).

⁸⁰⁰ II, 8,1,4-7

⁸⁰¹ See also II, 9,35; II, 14,42; I, 37,4; II, 39,22; 40, title.

⁸⁰² *هتدله*.

⁸⁰³ Within the first category, Isaac lists six types of revelations: by senses, by the psychic sight, by rapture of the spirit, by rank of prophecy, in an intellectual way and in a dream (I, 19, p. 106/ B, 156). All these are partial, some glimpses of truth, according to the personal spiritual state. I will analyse them at large later on.

⁸⁰⁴ I, 19, p. 108 (B, 118-119); one may find here a kinship with the Platonic philosophy.

a strict rational knowledge, but rather involving the direct action of the Holy Spirit. One particularity of this form of knowledge is that it stems from a material reality (meditating on Scripture or the mystery of salvation⁸⁰⁵) and meets either the revelations of angels or those of the Holy Spirit⁸⁰⁶. In French, the translator preferred the term “intuitions” (insights), while in Italian, although with a lack of perfect synonymy, he opted for the term “comprensione” (understanding). One can say that the “insight” is a short immediate contact with the eschatological reality. According to Isaac’s perception, this occurs when one reaches perfection in the stage of the soul, as a foretaste and guarantee of the spiritual stage. In the paragraph below Isaac describes this kind of experience:

When he is fully in the mode of life of the soul, every now and then it happens that some stirrings of the spirit arise indistinctly in him, and he begins to perceive in his soul a hidden joy and consolation: like lightning flashes and by way of example particular mystical insights⁸⁰⁷ arise and are set in motion in his mind. At this his heart at one bursts out with joy⁸⁰⁸.

A second important characteristic of this experience is its shortness. What lasts for a long period of time is joy, serenity, sweetness, peace and hope, at the level of the mind. A third particularity seems to be the effect it generates upon the mind – it becomes motionless and from here, there is only one step up to spiritual contemplation⁸⁰⁹. One can identify the anticipatory character of the spiritual state in this experience by looking at the role of grace, which descends on human while being in prayer or meditation (on Scripture or Christ’s Economy), and leads the intellect into the “Holy of Holies” of the mysteries⁸¹⁰.

In direct relation to the previous form of knowledge we will analyze another intuitive cognitive form, typically described by two quite synonymous terms – ܠܡܥܠܐ and ܠܝܡܐ, rendered with “wonder” (awe, stupor). They refer mostly to the highest stage of spiritual life – the spiritual stage, contemplation in silence of the divine mystery of God, when the senses are suspended, as well as any type of movement. Isaac argues that this condition involves the intellect as well as the mind or thinking. For example, in what he calls mystical “overshadowing”⁸¹¹ of the Holy Spirit, the intellect “is sized and dilated in a sense of

⁸⁰⁵ II, 3.2, 14.

⁸⁰⁶ II, 3.3, 91.

⁸⁰⁷ ܠܡܥܠܐ ܕܡܝܫܬܐ ܕܠܝܡܐ.

⁸⁰⁸ II, 20, 19.

⁸⁰⁹ II, 7, 1.

⁸¹⁰ II, 30, 8-10.

⁸¹¹ ܠܡܥܠܐ ܕܡܝܫܬܐ ܕܠܝܡܐ ; On the sense of this shadowing see the study of Sebastian Brock, “*Maggnanuta*: a Technical Term in East Syrian Spirituality and its Background”, *Mélanges Antoine Guillaumont - Contributions à l’étude des christianismes orientaux*, Genève, 1988, p. 121-129. Isaac speaks about two types of shadowing: the first one

wonder⁸¹² in a kind of divine revelation⁸¹³. As long as this divine activity overshadows the intellect, the person is raised up above the movement of the thoughts of his soul, thanks to the participation of the Holy Spirit⁸¹⁴. Wonder occurs as a consequence of the fact that divinity cannot be grasped by human's natural faculties and requires the revelation of the Holy Spirit. It is the way by which human may apophatically experience the divine knowledge. In the Third Collection we read that “as often as the mind (ܡܢܬܐ) seeks to look on what is hidden but falls short of it because of its being concealed ‘the mind’ may, with these ‘properties’ observe as in wonder (ܚܝܡܐ) that Nature which cannot be comprehended naturally, whether by vision (ܚܝܬܐ), intellect (ܡܢܬܐ) or thought (ܡܠܚܬܐ)”⁸¹⁵. This time, Isaac associates “wonder” to “intellect/ mind”, and some other times to “thinking”. He connects the knowledge of the truth to the mind's state of wonder, as illustrated in the next paragraph: “we call ‘truth’ the right reflection on God, which stems from Him, upon which someone stumbles in their thought/ mind (ܡܠܚܬܐ), in a kind of state of wonder (ܚܝܡܐ) – at spiritual mysteries”⁸¹⁶.

As in the case of “insights”, “wonder” is directly connected with prayer⁸¹⁷ or meditation on the future things and God's Nature⁸¹⁸, on the providence⁸¹⁹ or God's mercy⁸²⁰. It turns itself into spiritual contemplation when there is no prayer, no meditation, or any other kind of movement. This stage refers to what Isaac calls “spiritual man”⁸²¹, “prisoner” of God's grace⁸²² and love⁸²³.

And “amazement” (awe/wonder) (ܚܝܡܐ) follows the same path: involves the intellect⁸²⁴, the mind⁸²⁵, and thinking⁸²⁶; begins from prayer and meditation on God⁸²⁷, creation⁸²⁸, Economy⁸²⁹ and providence⁸³⁰; it is an action of the Holy Spirit⁸³¹, who makes the

described as a divine protection (practical sense), and the second one, much more important for our debate, the mystical, occurs at the noetic level, by divine revelation (II, 16).

⁸¹² ܡܢܬܐ ܥܠܝܬܐ ܚܝܡܐ ܡܢ ܥܝܢܐ ܥܠܝܬܐ ; ܥܠܝܬܐ - means to take by force, seize, with a fairly violent sense.

⁸¹³ ܡܢܬܐ ܡܠܚܬܐ.

⁸¹⁴ II, 16,5; II, 22,6; In II, 3.3,60, Isaac uses ܚܝܡܐ, ܚܝܬܐ and ܡܠܚܬܐ without any distinction between them.

⁸¹⁵ III, 4,3.

⁸¹⁶ II, 8,1.

⁸¹⁷ II, 35,1; I, 22.

⁸¹⁸ II, 3.3,49.

⁸¹⁹ II, 35,3.

⁸²⁰ III, 11,27.

⁸²¹ ܡܢܬܐ ܚܝܡܐ ; II, 3.3,92.

⁸²² II, 1,32.

⁸²³ II, 20,20.

⁸²⁴ III, 2,27.

⁸²⁵ II, 3.2,10; II, 14,24.

⁸²⁶ II, 3.2,89; 4.66.

⁸²⁷ II, I,42; II, 3.1,86; III, 3,6.

⁸²⁸ II, 36,1.

heart “prisoner”⁸²⁹ and silences all the emotions. Occasionally, one can identify a qualitative succession of two states described by the two terms. If “amazement” (ܐܝܡܢܐ) remains linked to a perception that comes from the meditation on the work of God, creation and providence, “wonder” (ܐܡܢܐ) would be a fruit of the direct intervention of the Holy Spirit, as anticipation of the future reality, prepared by the former⁸³⁰.

Isaac of Niniveh proposes a gnosiological itinerary that involves a full participation of the human as subject in this process. In consequence, this means that in addition to the strict gnoseologic powers (of intellectual nature), he involves the sensitive-spiritual power as well, that being the heart, in the line of Pseudo Macarius and John the Solitary, as argued above. Isaac renders this form of knowledge with ܐܝܡܢܐ, “feeling”/ “perception”. Sabino Chialà includes this form of knowledge in the spectrum “knowledge – experience” and claims that it relates to real and practical knowledge. Therefore he opts for the modern term “perception”⁸³¹. In parallel, André Louf enlarges the spectrum of this term and argues that it describes an experience of sensorial, mental, intellectual or spiritual nature. And yet, because the root of the term refers directly to a specific sensorial experience, he opts for the term “feeling”⁸³². We will point to some examples to emphasize that this form of knowledge rendered by “feeling” does not refer to bodily or psychic senses, but to the spiritual cognitive ones. First, the “feeling” that generates “spiritual prayer” is beyond the knowledge of created beings⁸³³, when grace dwells in the thought (ܐܝܡܢܐ)⁸³⁴. It is the experience of God’s Kingdom⁸³⁵, “the feeling (ܐܝܡܢܐ) of what is in God... as is stupor (ܐܡܢܐ), in the fullness of God’s love⁸³⁶”, referring to what pertains to his nature (ܐܡܢܐ)⁸³⁷.

There is also another example where Isaac lets us glimpse into what he means when speaking about “feeling” what is in God. This time, in a very clear way, he points out that this process is not limited to intellectual activity, but rather that it is accomplished by the junction

⁸²⁹ II, 3.4,48; 21,13.

⁸³⁰ II, 30,7; III, 12,20.

⁸³¹ II, 3.2,89.

⁸³² II, 3.1,88; II, 3.4,48.

⁸³³ For details see: A. Louf, “*Temha – stupore e tahrā – meraviglia negli scritti di Isacco di Ninive*”, *La grande stagione della mistica siriano-orientale (VI-VII secolo)*, Centro Ambrosiano, 2009, p. 93-117 and S. Seppälä, *In Speechless Ecstasy: Expression and Interpretation of Mystical Experience in Classical Syriac and Sufi Literature*, Studia Orientalia 98, 2003, Helsinki, Finnish Oriental Society, p. 77-80.

⁸³⁴ “Percezione”; Sabino Chialà, „Introduzione”, Isacco di Ninive, *Terza collezione*, p. XXVII.

⁸³⁵ “Ressentir”; André Louf, „Introduction”, Isaac le syrien, *Oeuvres spirituelles II*, p. 86.

⁸³⁶ ܐܝܡܢܐ ܐܡܢܐ ; III, 14,3.

⁸³⁷ III, 13,24.

⁸³⁸ III, 3,18.

⁸³⁹ ܐܝܡܢܐ ܐܡܢܐ ; III, 4,1, 5-6; II, 62, p. 430.

⁸⁴⁰ III, 4,1,7; III, 11,2; III, 13,15; II, 15, 11; II, 3.4,48.

of the cognitive faculties and the “feeling” of the heart. Rational power is swallowed up by the sweetness of feeling:

By knowledge I do not intend a rational motion or what is of the cognitive part⁸⁴¹, but that perception (ḥayyāh) which assuages the rational power⁸⁴² with a certain pleasure of wonder and it brings to the sweetness of stillness, ‘away’ from the course of all thought... This is the taste of the future perfection⁸⁴³ mystically foretold in this life, and also in a mystic way about the joy which is the taste of the pledge of the Kingdom⁸⁴⁴.

The last form of knowledge to which we will refer in this introductory chapter is called by Isaac “spiritual prayer”⁸⁴⁵. The 22th discourse of the First collection is dedicated entirely to this concept. Moreover, this chapter explains not only Isaac’s vision on prayer and, in particular, spiritual prayer, but also reveals the general principle that stands at the very base of his mystical vision. In this framework, he clearly points to a qualitative difference between pure prayer⁸⁴⁶, which is the boundary between the stage of the soul and that of the spirit, and spiritual prayer, which occurs in the spiritual conduct. The first type describes what prayer is by definition, while the second is improperly called by this name, for, although it is generated during prayer, it is rather a “divine vision during prayer”⁸⁴⁷, when “from prayer certain contemplation is born which also makes prayer vanish from the lips. And he to whom this contemplation happens becomes as a corps without soul, in ecstasy^{848,849}. At this stage, the mind no longer prays and there is no movement whatsoever. Isaac speaks about prayer and vision during prayer, the first state generating the second, and yet in a completely different manner.

Spiritual prayer is a name for spiritual knowledge. Isaac clearly points to this aspect when he mentions that this state is sometimes called “theoria”⁸⁵⁰, or “knowledge”⁸⁵¹, or “revelation of intelligible things”⁸⁵². All these names partially describe the meaning of participation in the divine mysteries, based on God’s revelation, but the exact reality remains

⁸⁴¹ ḥayyāh ḥayyāh ḥayyāh.

⁸⁴² ḥayyāh ḥayyāh ḥayyāh.

⁸⁴³ (ḥayyāh ḥayyāh ḥayyāh) I, 51, p. 367; II, 3,4,34; III, 3,10-11; III, 13,17.

⁸⁴⁴ See the two stages: of the right and the perfect people; ḥayyāh ḥayyāh (I, 3, p. 31; II, 12, p. 121,123; II, 3,1,67; II, 3,3,48; III, 2,7; III, 13, 13,17).

⁸⁴⁵ ḥayyāh ḥayyāh ḥayyāh.

⁸⁴⁶ ḥayyāh ḥayyāh ḥayyāh.

⁸⁴⁷ ḥayyāh ḥayyāh ḥayyāh.

⁸⁴⁸ ḥayyāh.

⁸⁴⁹ I, 22, p. 112 (B, 164).

⁸⁵⁰ ḥayyāh.

⁸⁵¹ ḥayyāh.

⁸⁵² ḥayyāh ḥayyāh ḥayyāh ; I, 22, p. 114 (B, 168).

transcendent. During spiritual prayer, the mind, “the treasurer of the senses” is swallowed up in the Spirit, in rapture and stupor, when there is no movement anymore. Stressing the idea that the generator of such a state is the Holy Spirit, Isaac condemns those “ignorants” (Messalians) who argue that they can experience spiritual prayer whenever they like⁸⁵³. Quoting Evagrius, he states that prayer ends the moment when, under the light of the Holy Trinity, one experiences stupor⁸⁵⁴. This condition goes beyond what is called knowledge, in the “knowledge behind knowledge”⁸⁵⁵.

In the last part of this chapter I will deal with two related terms that refer to the ascetic condition required to reach spiritual knowledge. It is about *ῥησμός* (purity) and *ῥησμός* (limpidity). When it comes to the use of the two terms, according to Robert Beulay, Isaac makes a personal interpretation of John the Solitary’s vision, as the two terms are related to the tripartite order of spiritual life, inherited from this author⁸⁵⁶. The scholar states that Isaac makes a reinterpretation because there is a disparity⁸⁵⁷ between the timing of using the two terms vis-à-vis the tripartite spiritual order at John and the bishop of Niniveh. Specifically, if John the Solitary places both purity and limpidity during spiritual stage, which culminates with perfection, Isaac mentions them during the stage of the soul, the latter being the boundary between the psychic and spiritual conduct, when the prayer is clean and continuous. For Isaac, as we have shown above, spiritual conduct implies the absence of any movement, including prayer, which turns into wonder before hidden things. This reinterpretation is strictly related to the synthesis between the Syriac tradition, eminently represented by John the Solitary and his tripartite spiritual itinerary, and the Greek tradition, in Evagrius’ line, for, as it was argued by Gabriel Bunge, Isaac employs a typically Evagrian language. The two terms refer, in his view, to the same reality, but the former – purity – denotes the means (cleaning) of reaching the state designated by the second – limpidity – which is the gateway to the reality of the new human, the state of grace, the holy rest, in Isaac’s words⁸⁵⁸. To put it differently, the two terms represent different degrees of the same progressive

⁸⁵³ On the relation between Isaac and the Messalians see Patrick Hagman, “St. Isaac of Niniveh and the Massalians”, N. Tamecke (ed.), *Mystik – Mataphor- Bild. Beiträge des VII. Makarios –Symposiums. Göttingen 2007*, Universitätsverlag Göttingen, 2008, p. 55-66; Nestor Kavvadas, “Theodore of Mopsuestia as a Source of Isaac of Niniveh’s Pneumatology”, *Parole de l’Orient*, 35 (2010), p. 1-13.

⁸⁵⁴ *Gnostikos* 30, J. Muyldermans, “Note additionnelle à: Evagriana”, *Le Museon*, 44 (1931), p. 377 (see the debate between Irinée Hausherr, “Par delà l’oraison pure grâce à une coquille. A propos d’un texte d’Evagre”, *Hésychasme et prière*, Orientalia Christiana Analecta, 176, Roma, p. 8-12 and Elie Khalifé Hachem, “La prière pure et la prière spirituelle selon Isaac de Ninive”, *Mémorial Mgr Gabriel Khouri-Sarkis*, Louvain, 1968, p. 157-176.

⁸⁵⁵ Evagrius, KG III.88.

⁸⁵⁶ Robert Beulay, *La lumière sans forme*, p. 117-125.

⁸⁵⁷ See the synthetical table of Robert Beulay, *La lumière sans forme*, p. 118.

⁸⁵⁸ Cf. Gabriel Bunge, “Le « lieu de la limpidité »”, *Irenikon*, 1 (1982), p. 7-18. Limpidity is describes as a place where God Himself dwells and, in consequence, here one can see him.

itinerary: if the former still refers to passions and thoughts in the form of temptations, the second inaugurates the entry into the spiritual state, which excludes all of these⁸⁵⁹.

Isaac describes the dynamics of the spiritual ascent in the following terms:

Compimento della penitenza (è) l'inizio della purezza (ܠܬܗܪܐܪܬܐ); compimento della purezza (è) l'inizio della limpidezza (ܠܬܗܪܐܪܬܐ); via della purezza (sono) I lavori della virtù⁸⁶⁰; essere resi limpidi (è) invece opera delle rivelazioni⁸⁶¹. La purezza è spogliazione delle passioni⁸⁶²; la limpidezza, spogliazione delle opinioni e mutazione delle intelligenze⁸⁶³ nella conoscenza esatta dei misteri^{864 865}.

Limpidity is the original condition of which man fell and needs to be restored⁸⁶⁶. This dynamic ascent to limpidity, on a Semitic background, is symbolically identified with the Jewish people fleeing out of Egypt (purification) and entering the Promised Land (limpidity)⁸⁶⁷. One can see that limpidity refers firstly to human's original condition and, yet, it also describes the final condition, superior to the edenic state.

4.5 Conclusion

In this chapter we have tried to make a direct reference to the main gnoseological vocabulary employed by Isaac of Niniveh. Quite different from our contemporary language, be it within the space of spiritual life, as we could see, one faces numerous subtleties and phrases, inherited from his spiritual mentors and frequently used in a personal manner. To this, one may add another key aspect related to the language Isaac uses – the Syriac language has a very rich vocabulary bank and, for this reason, different Syriac terms appear in modern languages almost as synonyms, and that may cause confusion when aiming to make an accurate reading. The concepts analysed above (the basic cognitive language) will come back in the next chapter at large, while trying to identify the doctrine of knowledge as expressed by Isaac within his mystical theology, in correspondence to the theological context of the East Syriac Church of his time.

⁸⁵⁹ III, 13, 11.

⁸⁶⁰ ܠܬܗܪܐܪܬܐ ܠܬܗܪܐܪܬܐ.

⁸⁶¹ ܠܬܗܪܐܪܬܐ ܠܬܗܪܐܪܬܐ.

⁸⁶² ܠܬܗܪܐܪܬܐ.

⁸⁶³ ܠܬܗܪܐܪܬܐ ܠܬܗܪܐܪܬܐ ܠܬܗܪܐܪܬܐ.

⁸⁶⁴ ܠܬܗܪܐܪܬܐ ܠܬܗܪܐܪܬܐ ܠܬܗܪܐܪܬܐ.

⁸⁶⁵ II, 3.4, 1-2.

⁸⁶⁶ I, 3, p. 15 (B, 22).

⁸⁶⁷ II, 3.3, 64.

5. The process of knowledge

The divine knowledge is one of the key themes in Isaac's work. Every subject he analyses envisages the exercise of penetrating God's mysteries more profoundly, finally described as a progressive divine cognitive process of the creation and regarding God Himself.

There are scarce studies on the process of knowledge according to Syriac writers. One should remember an important and yet partial study of the last century, dedicated to Isaac's gnoseologic vision in comparison to Pseudo Macarius' and Simon the Theologian's, written as doctoral thesis by Fr. Justin Popovitch – *Les voies de la connaissance de Dieu: Macaire d'Egypte, Isaac le Syrien, Syméon le Nouveau Théologien*⁸⁶⁸ – using the Greek translation of the First collection. The perspective is very theological and, in particular, constructed in a mystical frame. A second important study on this issue, more contemporary, is conducted by Serafim Sepälä, *The idea of knowledge in East Syrian Mysticism*⁸⁶⁹ and, tangentially, his doctoral thesis, *In Speechless Ecstasy: Expression and Interpretation of Mystical Experience in Classical Syriac and Sufi Literature*⁸⁷⁰, where in a systematic manner, from a theological and philosophical point of view, he tries to grasp the place of knowledge within the mystical East Syriac context. One can add some other works that, while dealing with East Syriac mystics, focus tangentially on the gnoseologic topic too. Among these, the most important is the introduction of Robert Beulay, *La lumière sans forme. Introduction à l'étude de la mystique chrétienne syro-orientale*⁸⁷¹, followed by Sebastian Brock's *Spirituality in the Syriac Tradition*⁸⁷², Sabino Chialà and his *Dall'asceti eremitica alla misericordia infinita. Ricerche su Isaaco di Ninive e la sua fortuna*⁸⁷³, Patrick Hagman with *The ascetism of Isaac of Niniveh*⁸⁷⁴ and some other authors who dedicated studies to specific mystical themes in Syriac literature. Two very important studies, tangentially focusing on this issue, have been published recently – Vittorio Berti dedicated a study to the East Syriac anthropology, *L'au-delà de l'âme et l'en-deça du corps. Morceaux d'anthropologie chrétienne de la mort dans l'église syro-orientale*⁸⁷⁵, and Nestor Kavvadas a volume on Pneumatology in Isaac's

⁸⁶⁸ Lausanne, Age d'Homme, 1998.

⁸⁶⁹ *Studia Orientalia* 101 (2007), p. 265-277.

⁸⁷⁰ *Studia Orientalia* 98 (2003).

⁸⁷¹ Chevtogne, 1987.

⁸⁷² Kottayam, St. Ephrem Ecumenical Research Institute (SEERI), 1989.

⁸⁷³ Biblioteca della rivista di storia e letteratura religiosa XIV, Firenze, Olschki, 2002.

⁸⁷⁴ Oxford, University Press, 2011.

⁸⁷⁵ Paradosis 57, Paris, 2014.

writings, within the East Syriac theological polemics in the seventh century – *Isaak von Ninive und seine Kephalaia Gnostika. Die Pneumatologie und ihr Kontext*⁸⁷⁶.

5.1 General aspects

After these technical aspects, the first observation refers to the way Isaac understands the concept of knowledge, quite different from the manner in which this concept is interpreted in Post-Cartesian thought. Serafim Sepälä, using an Aristotelian division, argues that the modern understanding of the concept is quantitative and needs criteria for verification, that the process of knowledge deals with the content of knowing and questions its basis and premises, while in Isaac's case, knowledge is experiential/ empirical and mystical by its nature, it goes beyond ordinary contents and the way of knowing is qualitative⁸⁷⁷. Knowledge is considered experiential, for it is connected to experiences that occur suddenly and mystical, since these are interpreted as being of divine origin. To briefly explain this difference, we may refer to a short fragment where Isaac himself deals with this process. Ascetic exercises are able to generate a state over passions, physical mortification or silence of thoughts, but they are not able to produce mystical knowledge. Isaac underlines that knowledge is not the result of investigation: "By zealous efforts⁸⁷⁸ and human thoughts⁸⁷⁹ no one can imagine that he has found knowledge; this happens by spiritual power⁸⁸⁰ so that he to whom the revelation is imparted, at that time is not aware of any thoughts of his soul⁸⁸¹, nor of those things which present themselves to his senses; neither does he use them nor he is acquainted with them"⁸⁸².

The second observation refers to the cognitive finality. As any process of knowledge, Isaac's concept aims at the Ultimate Truth, ultimate realities, beyond the ordinary level. In particular, he refers to God's works in creation, his revelations, and not his essence. Explicitly, he speaks about "knowledge of everything concerning God"⁸⁸³. This knowledge is simple, without any psychological intervention or the mind's imaginative function⁸⁸⁴.

From an epistemological point of view, this implies two elements: the object and the way. While the Ultimate Truth is hardly definable, the object refers to God as revealed in creation, in Scriptures and in different spiritual forms of revelation, and the way points

⁸⁷⁶ Leiden-Boston, Brill, 2015.

⁸⁷⁷ Serafim Sepälä, *The idea of knowledge in East Syrian Mysticism*, p. 266.

⁸⁷⁸ ܠܦܥܠܐ.

⁸⁷⁹ ܠܬܝܠܝܬܐ ܠܢܝܝܐ.

⁸⁸⁰ ܠܬܝܠܝܬܐ ܠܢܝܝܐ.

⁸⁸¹ ܠܬܝܠܝܬܐ ܠܢܝܝܐ.

⁸⁸² I, 19, p. 105 (B, 155). See also II, 18, 20; I, 6, p. 84 (B, 124).

⁸⁸³ ܠܬܝܠܝܬܐ ܠܢܝܝܐ ܠܬܝܠܝܬܐ ܠܢܝܝܐ; I, 19, p. 108 (B, 160).

⁸⁸⁴ I, 77, p. 354 (B, 527).

directly to intuitive methods, rather than discursive ones. This is why, sometimes, the term ܡܚܝܬܐ is rendered with “understanding”⁸⁸⁵. Based on this, one can argue that, from an epistemological point of view, mystical knowledge goes beyond what is naturally called knowledge.

Isaac admits both ways of knowing, discursive as well as intuitive, only that the latter one represents a superior level of the former and it is its very aim. Even mystical knowledge has a descriptive content, but it is part of what he will call the “knowledge of philosophers”. The former is more reflexive and constituted, it “handles” information, while the latter is immediate, internalized, personal and active, and “is produced” by what Isaac calls inspiration, revelation.

It is difficult to speak about methods in Isaac’s discourses and yet one can identify a kind of mystical epistemology in the line of Evagrius and John the Solitary, as I have already mentioned above. Simon Taibuteh seems to be more systematic, clearly pointing to six modes or stages⁸⁸⁶. These stages will be listed in parallel with Isaac’s stages, trying to intuit a valid correspondence between them.

ISAAC of NINIVEH	SIMON TAIBUTEH
Against nature – subject to passions	First natural knowledge (by scientific investigation) Unnatural knowledge/ defective knowledge (inclination towards evil; entangled with passions)
According to nature – virtuous life	Natural knowledge (within human nature; virtuous life) Second natural knowledge – moral good
Primary natural contemplation – contemplation of God in creation	Intelligible knowledge/ theory – spiritual content of physical beings
Secondary natural contemplation – contemplation of the spiritual powers	Spiritual knowledge – contemplation of the spiritual powers, angelic activity
Supernatural knowledge (True knowledge; Spiritual knowledge) – Theoria (divine vision)	Knowledge of the world to come – contemplation of the Divine nature, the three Divine Persons (Essence of the Holy Trinity)
Un-knowledge (faith) – no movement, drunkenness, spiritual prayer, stupor, divine love	Supernatural knowledge or no-knowledge – loss of identity; merging into grace and knowledge

⁸⁸⁵ See I, 51, p. 249 (B, 371); II, 22,4; II, 31,6.

⁸⁸⁶ Cf. A. Mingana, *Early Christian Mystics*, Woodbrooke Studies 7, Cambridge, 1934, p. 47-48 (commentary p. 2); See also Serafim Sepälä, *The idea of knowledge in East Syrian Mysticism*, p. 269. Simon speaks also about three types of knowledge: natural, implanted in the nature of our creation, which grows and is illuminated by good things. The same knowledge, by inclining towards evil things, entangled with material passions, becomes knowledge outside nature, and risen above the earthly things, toward the Essence of the Holy Trinity, becomes, above nature or no-knowledge.

Looking at this table, one can mainly draw three conclusions, extremely important for our research. Firstly, there is a transformative and progressive evolution in the process of knowing. This means a mystical experience, due to the external and inner purification and, especially, to God's intervention, creates spiritual eyes, spiritual faculties, capable, in consequence, to spiritually see God's rationality in creation and finally God himself. It implies a kind of spiritualization or transfiguration. The reality is the same, but the perspective is different as attaining what Isaac calls "true knowledge".

Secondly, a spiritual person is able to identify the mutuality and dependency between the external and the inner phenomena, as he achieves a unitary way of regarding the reality – as a totality. It is here that the connection between the emotional and cognitive dimension of knowledge appears. The cause of this transformation of vision is the hidden light, the divine grace.

Thirdly, there is a strong connection between present and eschatological times. This means, in other words, there is a passage between *chronos* and *kairos*. The spiritual knowledge always aims at foretasting the life to come. That means a mystic is not in search of spiritual experiences, but aims to enter a new reality and, in consequence, to transform his whole life.

This chapter will be constructed in three sections and eleven subchapters. The first section will be dedicated to the progressive spiritual itinerary and the evolution of knowledge according to this spiritual journey. In parallel, there will be an analysis of Isaac's perspective with some of the contemporary writers, within the frame of the theology of two of his main mentors, John the Solitary and Evagrius. As a natural consequence, in the next section we will focus on the anthropology Isaac proposes when describing his gnoseologic system, in particular on the cognitive powers of the soul. The thirdly and the most consistent section will be dedicated specifically to Isaac's epistemological premises, dealing with the causes, effects, characteristics and, especially, the forms, analysed in five patristic binoms: wordly knowledge and spiritual knowledge, knowledge and faith, knowledge and un-knowledge, knowledge and vision and knowledge and spiritual prayer.

5.2 Ascetical itinerary

Patrick Hagman, in his study mentioned above, focuses specifically on Isaac's ascetical itinerary. In his large introduction he traces the general lines while scientifically dealing with

this concept⁸⁸⁷. He quotes different possible definitions and interrogates them within the eastern theological frame so as to finally interpret them within Isaac's own way of understanding the process. He tries to follow the path from text (theory) to context (concrete practice). On what concerns our interest in this study, we will use asceticism in a holistic sense, both negative, as self-denial and renunciation, considered as formative, as well as positive or functional, aiming at spiritual transformation and a good communication between inner person and outside world.

Dealing with this process means referring to a path, an aim (ultimate and immediate) and a practice. It is also true that the three elements are indissolubly connected. The path describes a progressive evolution of human from an inferior to a superior stage that, generally, in the eastern tradition is interpreted as a flight from the world (*anachoresis*), so as to offer the space for an essential preparation for service in the world⁸⁸⁸. The ultimate aim refers to inheriting the life to come, while the immediate one points to the physical, psychological and spiritual experiences, symbolically described as joy, peace, love, vision, drunkenness, unknowledge, faith, as we will detail below. And, finally, a practice, that includes acts and attitudes, forms of renunciation (expressed in a negative language), as well as positive manifestation of divine grace (affirmative expression) in concrete positive experiences.

In the line of Hagman, we will point to six ideas-premises regarding the analysis of asceticism in Isaac's writings. Firstly, Isaac understands asceticism in positive terms and, in consequence, it is a free choice and response to face different situations. Then asceticism is rational, based on a choice that makes sense, and not on faulty conceptions of the world or the self. Asceticism presupposes a performance, involving both the ascetic and an audience – a text and a message. In the same line, asceticism is transformative, regarding the self, the world and the society. And lastly, it involves both body and soul and their own faculties⁸⁸⁹. The last three elements will be fundamental issues of the discourse on ascetical path.

Up to Isaac's period, two main ascetic patterns emerged – two stage or three-stage itineraries. The Antiochene School used to refer to a two-stage pattern. This two-stage pattern is to be found in "The Book of Steps". Its unknown author makes a sharp distinction between two different kinds of commandments to be found in the Gospels, the minor commandments and the major commandments, the latter being more radical, such as, in particular, in Matthew

⁸⁸⁷ Patrick Hagman, *The Asceticism of Isaac of Niniveh*, p. 3-24.

⁸⁸⁸ Kallistos Ware, "The Way of Ascetics: Negative or Affirmative?", in Vincent L. Wimbush and Richard Valantasis (eds.), *Asceticism*, Oxford University Press, 1998, p. 3-15 (here 4-6).

⁸⁸⁹ Patrick Hagman, *The Asceticism of Isaac of Niniveh*, p. 20-21.

10:38. In the author's Christian community the minor commandments are kept by "the upright" (ܡܫܝܚܝܬܐ), while the major ones are observed by the mature or "perfect" (ܡܫܝܚܐ).

The bipartite pattern is also to be found in the discourses of Philoxenos of Mabbug, but with a different emphasis and terminology. For him the minor commandments correspond to those followed by Christ before his Baptism (Mosaic Law), while the major commandments are those which he observed after his Baptism and during his public ministry. This effectively meant that to take up the greater commandments was the same thing as to enter into monastic life.

The tripartite itinerary⁸⁹⁰ follows more the Alexandrine pattern. The psychic stage would describe the normal state of a monk, the corporeal stage his former life, while the spiritual stage his goal, foretasted already in the earthly life. In the Syriac milieu, Ephraim the Syrian offered for the first time a tripartite pattern and yet incipient and quite different from the successive developments, when speaking about "the penitent", "the righteous" and "the resplendent". But the most important voice, considered as the father of the East Syriac spirituality is John the Solitary. Using as starting point Saint Paul's anthropology (1 Thessalonians 5:23), he counterparts the Greek terms *sarkikos*, *psychikos* and *pneumatikos* with the Syriac *pagrana*, *naphshana*, and *ruhana*, translated as "on the level of the body, soul, respectively, of the spirit"⁸⁹¹. Adding the suffix "utha", he points to three stages: somatic (against nature), dominated by carnal passions; noetic, according to nature/ natural, transitory to the spirituality of angels, which presupposes a rough physical and intellectual asceticism; and spiritual, above nature, which is communion with God, a foretaste of the future world. Here one deals with what John calls purity, limpidity and perfection. In other words, the progress from the level of the body to that of the soul can be interpreted as interiorisation (the birth of the inner person). The border between the level of the soul and the spiritual level is marked by what he calls "limpidity" (*shaphyuta*) that describes the self-emptying of the interior and combines the purity with clarity and lucidity.

The practical stage of Evagrius, which presupposes an ascetic lifestyle, does not correspond to John's bodily stage, used to describe those who have no divine knowledge, but refers already to the psychical stage, or the bodily and, partially, the noetic conduct. For John, escaping bodily life means turning towards the other world and transforming jealousy, characteristic for the bodily stage, into a sense of justice. The psychic person turns from an

⁸⁹⁰ For the Latin tradition (in particular Thomas of Aquino) there are three categories of ascetics too: incipientes, proficientes and perfecti.

⁸⁹¹ *Dialogues sur l'âme et les passions des hommes* 13-14.

excessive concern of the body towards the soul, and is concerned with the practice of virtuous acts and penitence. And, finally, perfection consists in the knowledge of the spirit⁸⁹².

Before turning to Isaac it is important to mention other several writers, translated into Syriac from Greek, with which these East Syriac monastic authors were familiar. Chief among them was Evagrius of Pontus. Isaac was certainly, as emphasised above, familiar with Evagrius' tripartite schema (*praktiki, gnostiki and theologiki*)⁸⁹³. Then comes Dionysius' tripartite schema of purification, illumination and unification, which must have been known to Isaac, though he never specifically refers to it. A third Greek author with a tripartite schema was Abba Isaiah, whose writings were much read in Syriac monastic circles, even receiving a commentary on them by Isaac's contemporary, Dadisho'. He describes the mode of life of solitaries divided up into three distinct elements: bodily labours, the mode of life of the mind, and spiritual contemplation (*theoria*)⁸⁹⁴.

Robert Beulay, in his mentioned work on East Syriac Spirituality, pictures the tripartite stages at the most important Syriac spiritual authors, tributary to John the Solitary, and shows the slightly different significance of each moment. There, he synthetically describes the evolution of the three stages in Simon Taibuteh, contemporary with Isaac. In his system, the corporeal stage refers to a passionate state, while the physical and mental conduct reflect the psychical order, having its correspondence in what he calls "natural knowledge". The last stage points to perfection, spirituality, and is characterised by spiritual contemplation of the corporals, of providence, of the incorporals and the life to come, aiming at what he calls unknown⁸⁹⁵. In parallel, he proposes a way of the ascetic consisting in seven phases: the noviciate (complete obedience); change of habits and way of conduct; struggle against passions by observing the commandments; labours of discernment; contemplation of the incorporeal beings; contemplation and wonder at the secrets of the Godhead; mysterious works of grace, submersion in divine love⁸⁹⁶.

The different dimensions of mystical knowledge give space to different expressions. The same author argues a tripartite division of spiritual life as "three intelligible altars"⁸⁹⁷ of

⁸⁹² S. Dederig, *Johannes von Lykopolis*, p. 66.

⁸⁹³ *Praktikos*, PG XL, 1233ab; *Letter to Anatolios*, PG XL, 1221c.

⁸⁹⁴ Cf. Dadisho, *Commentaire du Livre d'Abba Isaïe (I-XIV) par Dadišo Qatraya*, CSCO 145 (227), XI.17, p. 117.

⁸⁹⁵ For details see Robert Beulay, *La lumière sans forme*, p. 118.

⁸⁹⁶ Cf. A. Mingana, *Early Christian Mystics*, Woodbrooke Studies 7, p. 287 (17).

⁸⁹⁷ See also Evagrius, *Kepalaia Gnostica* (KG II.57-58; V.84). There the three stages of contemplation: the third altar is the contemplation of the Holy Trinity, the other two are the first natural and second natural contemplations. The wisdom which concerns the second altar makes known the wisdom of the third, and that which concerns the first altar is anterior to that which is in the second (II.57-58). The wisdom of the contemplation of the angels (second altar) leads to the contemplation of the Holy Trinity (third altar), whereas

mystical knowledge pertaining to the mysteries of Friday, Saturday and Sunday (corresponding to Christ's passion, descent to Sheol and Resurrection). The first altar refers to the knowledge out of works, in correspondence with Friday, that is observing the commandments; the second altar, of Saturday, names the knowledge out of contemplation, illuminative, pictured as the key to the divine mysteries hidden in creation; the third one, the living altar of Christ, corresponding to the mystery of Sunday, is the mystical knowledge of hope, when the mind of the hermit is united with Christ just as Christ is united with the Father⁸⁹⁸. The highest level of mystical knowledge is the experience of "shapeless eternal light" that transcends all intelligence. Using a language that comes very close to that of Timothy I and the other East Syriac contemporary mystics (as well as to that of Gregory Palamas, later on), Simon shows that this mystical knowledge occurs: "when the grace will dwell in that impassibility and the mind will be conscious of the sublime and endless mysteries which are poured out by the Father and Source of all lights, which shine mercifully on us in the secret likeness of His hidden Goodness; and the mind be impressed by them with the likeness of the glory of goodness, as much as it can bear, according to its expectations, its eager longing and the measure of his growth in spiritual exercise"⁸⁹⁹.

Another important author, when dealing with the ascetic path in three stages, is John of Dalyatha. In summary, in his conception, while the corporeal stage presupposes the denial of the physic comfort, the psychic stage entails penitence, the intention of renewing life by means of inner and outer asceticism. The spiritual stage refers to purity⁹⁰⁰ – complete liberation from passions, and limpidity⁹⁰¹ – a transparence to God that makes human able to receive the revelations of God's mysteries and the new world⁹⁰². As the other Syriac mystics, Dalyatha is not very consistent with the identification of the moments in the ascetic itinerary. This is why one can observe a quite different division of the three stages. This time, he describes the cognitive progress implying a schema of three spheres: the first one refers to the impassible purity of the soul, which is characterized by the contemplation of the corporeal beings and symbolized by the light of the moon; the sphere of serenity of the intellect pertains to the contemplation of the incorporeal and is symbolized by the light of the stars; and the

the contemplation of the reasons (*logoi*) of created things (first altar) leads to the contemplation of the angelic powers (second altar). Of the three altars of gnosis, two have circle and the third appears without a circle (IV.88). The altar without a circle is the contemplation of the Holy Trinity and the other two altars the first and second natural contemplation.

⁸⁹⁸ Cf. A. Mingana, *Early Christian Mystics*, Woodbrooke Studies 7, p. 303 (41-42).

⁸⁹⁹ A. Mingana, *Early Christian Mystics*, p. 286 (15).

⁹⁰⁰ ܠܚܘܒܐ.

⁹⁰¹ ܠܚܘܒܐ.

⁹⁰² Cf. R. Beulay, *L'enseignement spirituel de Jean de Dalyatha*, p. 35.

third one, without a specific name, characterized by the vision of the Light of the Holy Trinity, symbolically assimilated by the light of the sun. One can identify here a qualitative progress of the light that accompanies the experience – if in the first sphere the mind is clothed in shapeless light, in the second sphere the sight is a fiery one, and in the third sphere the vision is of crystal light⁹⁰³. John defines the ultimate state of the spiritual progress as unification and likeness, when one who becomes “divine” and “alike with God”⁹⁰⁴, or “a mirror” that reflects the invisible and where Christ shines forth in him⁹⁰⁵. The Syriac term for unification is ܐܠܗܐ⁹⁰⁶ or even the bold expression discussed above, mingling (ܡܠܬܐ) ⁹⁰⁷.

We will evoke one last important author when dealing with the ascetic path, following the same tripartite division, Joseph Hazzaya. He portrays the ascetic path in three moments called “stages”, “orders”, “levels” or “places/ spheres”, expressed in two different series that interpenetrate and overlap each other:

- Corporeal stage (ܐܬܡܝܢܐ) – sphere of purification (ܐܬܡܝܢܐ ܐܬܡܝܢܐ)
- Psychic stage (ܐܬܡܝܢܐ) – sphere of limpidity/ serenity (ܐܬܡܝܢܐ ܐܬܡܝܢܐ)
- Spiritual stage/ spirituality (ܐܬܡܝܢܐ) – sphere of perfection (ܐܬܡܝܢܐ ܐܬܡܝܢܐ)⁹⁰⁸.

The first stage assimilated to the novitiate in coenobitic life, includes vocal prayers, ascetic labours in order to free from passions, (purification) and aims at attaining a “natural state” and the vision of natural knowledge hidden in creation. The sphere of limpidity, that presupposes a hermitical life, includes the practice of the inner virtues, unceasing prayer, peace and certainty that generates compassions towards all. In the cognitive plan, the contemplation takes higher forms – of the incorporals, judgment and providence and, finally, the spiritual contemplation as the border with the last stage. The spiritual stage pertains to the intellect’s activity, beyond all kind of works. It is the place of perfection and the highest level of contemplation – the vision of Christ and the Holy Trinity in the shapeless light.

The tripartite schema of “the workings of grace of the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ” is detailed by the same author in eleven stages that are not really given actual names so as not to engage too much in theoretical speculation, but to give space to the reality of experience. I will evoke them at short, using the synthesis done by Serafim Sepälä:

⁹⁰³ Cf. R. Beulay, *La collection de lettres de Jean de Dalyatha. Edition critique de texte syriaque inédit traduction française, introduction et notes*, PO 39, Turnhout-Brepols, 1978, 48 : 4-13, p. 500-507.

⁹⁰⁴ R. Beulay, *La collection de lettres de Jean de Dalyatha*, 13:1, p. 342-343.

⁹⁰⁵ R. Beulay, *La collection de lettres de Jean de Dalyatha*, 14:2; 4:9, p. 344-345; 318-319.

⁹⁰⁶ R. Beulay, *La collection de lettres de Jean de Dalyatha*, 29:1; 40: 1, 6, p. 390-391; 422-423; 424-425.

⁹⁰⁷ At Isaac “complete mingling with God” (ܡܠܬܐ ܡܠܬܐ ܡܠܬܐ), II, 19,6.

⁹⁰⁸ Cf. A. Mingana, *Early Christian Mystics*, Woodbrooke Studies 7, p. 263-269 (150-158).

- The stage of complete physical and psychical rest – maximum of quietude;
- The stage of workings of intuitions – against distraction of mind; the recitation of Psalms and prostrations before the Cross are recommended;
- The stage of the love of Psalms and of recitation – freeing the mind from vain glory;
- The stage of the flow of tears and continual prostrations before the Cross. This is the boundary between purity and limpidity;
- The stage of contemplation of divine judgement and providence, continual prayer. Christ is identified in all;
- The stage of impulses of light and fire stirrings in the heart, while the Spirit operates in the senses of smell and taste;
- The state of hearing the voice of glorification – stirrings of the world to come; the mind participates to the Cherubim's praise;
- The stage when the mind is silenced and swallowed up in the light of the vision of lofty and sublime contemplation; the mind is mingled with the divine visitation;
- The stage of clothing oneself with fire in which one sees oneself as fire and receives knowledge concerning the world to come. The affected senses are sight and touch;
- The stage “inexpressible in a letter”, in which one feels joy and sheds tears without knowing why; the active senses are touch, sight and smell, but the distinctions between them are, in a way, blurred;
- The stage of flow of spiritual speech, during which the hearing is active⁹⁰⁹.

Turning to Isaac's ascetic vision, one can identify few passages where he employs the tripartite schema described above at some East Syriac authors. He uses terms such as ranks⁹¹⁰, or measures⁹¹¹, so as to describe the cognitive and spiritual progress. In the discourse 45 of the First collection, Isaac expresses the dynamism and the qualitative cognitive progress employing his own experience of navigator in the Persian Gulf from Beth Qatraye to Mesopotamia:

⁹⁰⁹ For details see Serafim Sepälä, *In Speechless Ecstasy: Expression and Interpretation of Mystical Experience in Classical Syriac and Sufi Literature*, Studia Orientalia 98/ 2003, p. 128-129.

⁹¹⁰ ܩܕܝܫܐ; Gr. τὰ ἁγία, I, 35, p. 247 (B, 369); II, 9, 11; 20, 3.

⁹¹¹ ܩܕܝܫܐ; I, 6, p. 87 (B, 128); II, 22, 1.

The sailor, when he is travelling in the midst of the sea, keeps his eyes on the stars as he steers his vessel, using them to indicate the harbour for which he is aiming. Similarly the monk keeps his eye on prayer as he directs his course to whatever haven his mode of life directs him: the monk keeps his eyes on prayer at the time so it may show him the island where he can moor his ship without fear, and from there take on provisions, and then continue on to the next island. Such is the course of life of the solitary as long as he is in this life, moving on from one island to another, from (one kind of) knowledge to another⁹¹²; just as with the change of islands, he encounters changes of kinds of knowledge⁹¹³ – until he goes ashore, and his voyage ends up in that true city whose inhabitants no longer engage in commerce, but everyone rests on the wealth (he has gained)⁹¹⁴.

One can identify two important aspects in the paragraph quoted above. One first important aspect refers to the cognitive path – there is a qualitative evolution that is conditioned by active participation, mostly described here by the concept of prayer. And secondly, this progress has as its ultimate aim the rest, described in some other places as silence, non-prayer, ignorance, drunkenness, or un-knowledge.

In the discourse 51 of the same collection, he specifically introduces the “three rankings” of knowledge and he describes them in detail⁹¹⁵. First of all, Isaac explains what he means by knowledge – “the ladder on which man ascends the height of faith”⁹¹⁶. At the same time, knowledge is a gift that pertains to the intelligible beings, simple⁹¹⁷, undivided in nature⁹¹⁸, despite the variations⁹¹⁹ and divisions⁹²⁰, in connection with their service. So, knowledge is one, but differs in variations ascending and descending according to its transformations into states that are more condensed or more subtilized. Then he lists the three stages (لُحُفَاف) – of the body, soul and spirit – describing the works and the type of knowledge that pertains to each of them.

The first cognitive phase⁹²¹ refers to the knowledge involved in worldly activities connected with the love of the body and its passions. It is considered as “ordinary”, and lacks any divine concern. Being attached to the body, it is opposed to faith and virtues as well.

The love of the soul generates the second order of knowledge⁹²², when it abandons the material goals and, supported by material senses and psychic impulses, cultivates the practice

⁹¹² كذا كذا كذا.

⁹¹³ كذا كذا كذا.

⁹¹⁴ I, 45, p. 218 (B, 326-327).

⁹¹⁵ I, 51, p. 249-251 (B, 369-375).

⁹¹⁶ I, 51, p. 246 (B, 367).

⁹¹⁷ كذا.

⁹¹⁸ كذا كذا كذا كذا.

⁹¹⁹ كذا.

⁹²⁰ كذا.

⁹²¹ كذا كذا كذا كذا.

of fasting, prayer, compassion, reading of the Scriptures, and the struggle against passions. The “second degree”⁹²³ or the “middle stage”⁹²⁴ is still an outward knowledge as is based on practice and it accomplishes its activity by the deeds perceptible by bodily senses.

The third ranking of knowledge⁹²⁵ is subtilized and acquires the spiritual degree, assuming the life of the invisible beings, and is performed by intelligible thoughts. Now the inner senses are elevated, so as to be able to examine the spiritual mysteries, attained by a simple and subtle intellect. In this way, one is able to experience the noetic resurrection as a foretaste of the renovation of the new world. Isaac clearly defines this process in an eschatological key: “What is knowledge? The apperception⁹²⁶ of immortal life. What is immortal life? Apperception⁹²⁷ in God. Knowledge concerning God is the highest of all desirable things”⁹²⁸.

In connection with the three elements inherited from John the Solitary – body, soul and spirit – Isaac names the three orders: preternatural⁹²⁹, natural⁹³⁰, and supernatural⁹³¹, corresponding to their own service. More specifically, he returns to the pattern of John the Solitary in the Second collection, 20th discourse. There he speaks about the “understanding” of he who is in the level of the body (فكر), fearful and concerned with the bodily things. The second category refers to he who lives the level of the soul (نفس), performing intelligible activity and reflection on resurrection. And, finally, he lists the level of the spirit (روح) when one attains the real knowledge and experiences the divine joy. Implying the consecrated biblical expression “I know a person...”, Isaac describes some mystical forms while picturing the spiritual conduct: “stirrings of Spirit”⁹³², “lightning flashes”⁹³³, “particular mystical insights”⁹³⁴, when one perceives a hidden joy and consolation⁹³⁵.

In the same collection, discourse 22, Isaac uses a different imagery to express the tripartite ascetic path and the evolution of knowledge according to each stage⁹³⁶: initial⁹³⁷,

⁹²² ܠܚܦܟܐ ܕܗܝܘܐ ܕܡܢ ܕܡܢ ܕܡܢ.

⁹²³ ܠܚܦܟܐ ܕܗܝܘܐ ܕܡܢ ܕܡܢ ܕܡܢ.

⁹²⁴ ܠܚܦܟܐ ܕܗܝܘܐ ܕܡܢ ܕܡܢ ܕܡܢ.

⁹²⁵ ܠܚܦܟܐ ܕܗܝܘܐ ܕܡܢ ܕܡܢ ܕܡܢ.

⁹²⁶ ܠܚܦܟܐ ܕܗܝܘܐ ܕܡܢ ܕܡܢ ܕܡܢ; Gr. αἵσθησις.

⁹²⁷ ܠܚܦܟܐ ܕܗܝܘܐ ܕܡܢ ܕܡܢ ܕܡܢ.

⁹²⁸ I, 62, p. 289 (B, 431).

⁹²⁹ ܠܚܦܟܐ ܕܗܝܘܐ ܕܡܢ ܕܡܢ ܕܡܢ.

⁹³⁰ ܠܚܦܟܐ ܕܗܝܘܐ ܕܡܢ ܕܡܢ ܕܡܢ.

⁹³¹ ܠܚܦܟܐ ܕܗܝܘܐ ܕܡܢ ܕܡܢ ܕܡܢ.

⁹³² ܠܚܦܟܐ ܕܗܝܘܐ ܕܡܢ ܕܡܢ ܕܡܢ.

⁹³³ ܠܚܦܟܐ ܕܗܝܘܐ ܕܡܢ ܕܡܢ ܕܡܢ.

⁹³⁴ ܠܚܦܟܐ ܕܗܝܘܐ ܕܡܢ ܕܡܢ ܕܡܢ.

⁹³⁵ II, 20, 13-19.

⁹³⁶ The same idea in II, 3.4, 42-48.

intermediary⁹³⁸ and concluding stage⁹³⁹. And, successively, he describes the works according to each level. Specific to the first manner of life is the discipline of fasting and recitation, accompanied by fear and sadness for previous way of life. The intermediary conduct is concentrated more on spiritual reading and continuous kneeling, while the way of perfect presupposes meditation and prayer of heart. In the second manner of life, penitence generates joyful stirrings and the feeling of hope in the mind and thoughts is more present. The amount of laborious works is lessened and some of them replace the others.

In this dynamism we can identify a qualitative progress in matter of works; the emphasis is placed not on material virtues, as they become more and more spiritual (noetic). This transformation is not so much due to human's inner powers, but they are out of grace and out of God's power that shadows⁹⁴⁰ him every moment. So as to describe the perfect conduct, Isaac employs some technical terms – stupor (ⲉⲙⲁⲃ) of God, peace (ⲡⲉⲥ), joy (ⲉⲃⲁⲛⲁ), drunkenness (ⲉⲃⲁⲛⲁⲓ) and sweetness (ⲉⲃⲁⲛⲁⲥⲱⲥ) of the heart. However, in his argumentation, Isaac makes a sharp distinction between the two levels and the third conduct. He clearly mentions a kind of stupor before God's Economy, described with the terms mentioned above, and the perfect stupor (ⲉⲙⲁⲃ ⲉⲙⲁⲃ), before the Nature of the Lord of the Lords (Deuteronomy 10:17; 1 Timothy 6:15), when the mind is at peace, exalted behind any perception, and nature surpasses knowledge into what he calls un-knowledge (ⲉⲃⲁⲛⲁ ⲉⲃ). One interesting detail appears in the final paragraph of his argumentation. The former type of stupor still pertains to knowledge, while the latter corresponds to the apperception of God. When one experiences stupor and his mind perceives the spiritual realities, he is still in the normal knowledge, despite the fact that his thoughts are unified and appeased in the natural thinking. Only the moment when his thinking goes beyond the earthly things and experiences the divine apperception, may one speak about complete stupor or un-knowledge. If the first two manners of living are partially conditioned by fear, as the hermit observes the commandments by fear of punishment or because of the rewards, the last one inaugurates the spiritual freedom, which pertains to the life of the sons.

The most prominent difference between the middle state and the perfect state in the ascetic itinerary is given by what Isaac calls “pure prayer” and “spiritual prayer”, on which he dedicates an entire discourse, the 22th of the First collection. He describes the meaning of

⁹³⁷ ⲉⲃⲁⲛⲁ ⲉⲃⲁⲛⲁⲥⲱⲥ.

⁹³⁸ ⲉⲃⲁⲛⲁ ⲉⲃⲁⲛⲁ.

⁹³⁹ ⲉⲃⲁⲛⲁ.

⁹⁴⁰ ⲉⲃ; see above the concept of “shadowing”.

“pure prayer” by comparing it to impure prayer: “If, at the times when the mind invites one of the soul’s stirrings to offer a sacrifice, it mingles in this sacrifice with some alien thoughts or distractions, then it is called impure, seeing that it has placed on the Lord’s altar – that is the intelligible heart – one of the unclean animals that is not permitted”⁹⁴¹. As some of his contemporaries have identified the pure prayer with the spiritual prayer, he feels obligated to redefine the real sense of the latter one. In fact, “spiritual prayer” is not anymore a prayer in the common sense of the word: “As soon as the spirit crosses the boundary of pure prayer and proceeds onwards there is neither prayer, nor emotions, nor tears, nor authority, nor freedom, nor beseeching, nor desire, nor longing after any of those things which are hoped in this world or in the world to be”⁹⁴². This aspect will be analysed later on, while speaking about the forms of mystical knowledge.

It is necessary to make an observation connected with the language employed by Isaac so that to describe the ascetical itinerary. Up to this point, we have dealt at large with the three orders corresponding to the tripartite anthropological structure – body, soul and spirit. But one could also grasp that Isaac also speaks about three conducts⁹⁴³, integrated within the three stages we are dealing with. If the first order – against nature – presupposes a state when the body and the soul are conditioned by material and intellectual passions⁹⁴⁴, as the bodily conduct⁹⁴⁵ refers already to an ascetical life, expressed in a negative language (purification of passions), is integrated in the second order – the natural state – followed by the soul’s conduct⁹⁴⁶ described as the intelligible ascetical purification. And the spiritual conduct⁹⁴⁷ pertains to the spiritual order.

So far we have referred to Isaac’s tripartite vision inherited from John the Solitary, but, as it was mentioned in the previous chapters, Isaac proves to be a faithful follower of Evagrius too. Therefore, he integrates the three conducts within Evagrius’ two stages, practical (πρακτική), concerned with keeping the commandments, and gnostic (γνωστική)⁹⁴⁸, focused on contemplation. In the first stage, the human fights against the passions (so called, eight evil spirits⁹⁴⁹), demons and thoughts; it represents the active stage. The second phase develops

⁹⁴¹ I, 22, p. 113 (B, 167).

⁹⁴² I, 22, p. 112 (B, 165).

⁹⁴³ ԲԻՅՈՒ.

⁹⁴⁴ Bodily life is for those who have no knowledge of God or spiritual matters (For John the Solitary see S. Dederling, *Johannes von Lykopolis*, p. 20-21).

⁹⁴⁵ ԲԻՅՈՒ ԲԻՅՈՒ.

⁹⁴⁶ The knowledge of the soul – ԲԻՅՈՒ ԲԻՅՈՒ.

⁹⁴⁷ ԲԻՅՈՒ ԲԻՅՈՒ.

⁹⁴⁸ *Praktikos*, PG 40, 1233ab; *Letter to Anatole*, PG 40, 1221c.

⁹⁴⁹ Λογισμοί.

itself into two stages: natural contemplation (φυσική) and the knowledge or the vision of God (θεολογική). Natural contemplation, in its turn, is divided into two stages: secondary natural contemplation, of the material reality and the inner logos within the visible beings, and the primary natural contemplation, which aims to the vision of the spiritual beings. As the second phase is already a spiritual science that goes beyond the mere sight of bodies it makes the effective transition towards the theological knowledge, the spiritual contemplation, or the vision of the light of the Holy Trinity. Evagrius does not admit the vision of God on earth, but only the “place of God”, “the formless light”, “the light of the intellect”.

In Isaac’s discourses, the conduct of the body and soul refers to the Evagrian purification that takes place during the practical stage, while the spiritual conduct and spiritual state mostly pertain to the gnostic stage, inaugurated by the primary natural contemplation. In order to support this affirmation the short fragment below indicates how Isaac develops this issue:

The service of the cross is a double one. And this is in accordance with its twofold nature which is divided into two parts: patience in face of bodily troubles which is accomplished through the instrumentality of the anger⁹⁵⁰ of the soul. This is called practice⁹⁵¹. And the subtle intellectual service, in intercourse with God, constant prayer and so on, which is performed with the desiring part⁹⁵² and called theory⁹⁵³. The one purifies the affectible part⁹⁵⁴ by the strength of zeal⁹⁵⁵; the other clears the intellectual part⁹⁵⁶ by the influence of the love of the soul⁹⁵⁷, which is the natural appetite^{958 959}.

The practice refers to bodily ascetical struggles accomplished by one of the fifth soul’s powers, as it will be later explained in the chapter dedicated to anthropology, – anger or zeal, while the noetic activity pertains to what Isaac calls “theoria”, realised with the participation of the desiring power, the natural appetite. The anthropological structure described here corresponds to the two domains, that is the purification of the affectible part, respectively, the intellectual part⁹⁶⁰.

⁹⁵⁰ Դժուար.

⁹⁵¹ Դժուարաց.

⁹⁵² Դժեշտելի.

⁹⁵³ Դիմի.

⁹⁵⁴ Դժեշտաց Դժուար.

⁹⁵⁵ Դժեշտ Դժուար.

⁹⁵⁶ Դժեշտաց Դժուար.

⁹⁵⁷ Դժուար Դժուար.

⁹⁵⁸ Դժուար Դժուար.

⁹⁵⁹ I, 2, p. 10 (B, 15).

⁹⁶⁰ Along with the desiring power, in other places, Isaac insists on reason (ճշմարտություն) as the faculty conducting to vision or contemplation, while the concupiscence (ճշմարտություն) and irascibility (ճշմարտություն) are connected to the practical stage. Moreover concupiscence and reason are the only powers of the soul (of the five listed there) pertaining to the eschatological reality. Insisting on the desiring power, one may consider Isaac tributary to John the Solitary,

In the same collection, 34th discourse, Isaac makes a sharp distinction between these two stages, using the same language as in the paragraph quoted above: “Two are the parts of the ascension of the cross. One is the crucifixion of the body. The second is the ascension to the contemplation; the former is a matter of freedom, the latter of influence”⁹⁶¹. The qualitative difference mentioned here refers to the cause – in the first situation, human’s role is much more present, while in the second there is a clear mention of the divine intervention, the crucifixion of the body referring to an ascetical life that prepares the contemplation.

5.3 *The ascetical knowledge*

So far, we have tried to demonstrate that, for Isaac, knowledge is an ascetical exercise. Therefore the next step aims to detail the type of practice, respectively, the type of knowledge corresponding to each stage.

We have stated above that there is a clear difference between “stage” and “conduct”. Despite the fact that Isaac is not very systematic and not so much consistent in terms of divisions, one can still identify the ascetical and cognitive process starting from these divisions. In the line of John the Solitary, bodily stage is preternatural, subjected to passions. Therefore, it is not part of spiritual ascent, and it describes those who have no knowledge (divine)⁹⁶². A virtuous life, in this context, takes place during the second stage – of the soul – according to nature, which presupposes the knowledge of those created⁹⁶³, perceived⁹⁶⁴ and thought⁹⁶⁵. This stage corresponds to the Evagrian *Praktiki* and *Phisiki*. The spiritual stage and the spiritual conduct, above nature, describe the divine contemplation⁹⁶⁶ and knowledge of the perfect⁹⁶⁷.

In the Second collection, the third centuria, quoting Evagrius, Isaac describes an ascetical progress and, consequently, a cognitive evolution, formed of four stages – four transformations: the decision to leave a bodily lifestyle and adopt a rational life; the second movement is given by the mind which does not find in mistake, but achieves the perception of the truth in the secondary beings; the third moment describes those who pass to their natural creatural order by means of spiritual learnings; and finally, the fourth one refers to being

and when talking about reason he becomes fairly Evagrian (Plotinian language)/ *Praktikos* 89; for details see II, 19, 1-5.

⁹⁶¹ I, 34, p. 151 (B, 223).

⁹⁶² It may be possible to speak strictly about a kind of rational (worldly) knowledge, as I will detail later on.

⁹⁶³ ܐܠܗܐ ܕܡܕܢܚܐ.

⁹⁶⁴ ܐܝܢܐ.

⁹⁶⁵ ܡܝܬܐ.

⁹⁶⁶ ܐܠܗܐ ܕܡܕܢܚܐ; In the Greek translation appears the adjective *ὑπερούσιος*.

⁹⁶⁷ ܐܠܗܐ; I, 3, p. 16 (B, p. 23).

moved by the eternal life, according to the evagelic contemplation⁹⁶⁸. We can identify in this enumeration the technical stages argued by Evagrius – praktiki, secondary natural contemplation (of the material beings/ phisiki), followed by the primary natural contemplation (theologiki), and the vision of the Holy Trinity. In the same collection, Isaac lists again four cognitive stages, that one may easily integrate in Evagrius’ anthropological system: pertaining to practical stage, the knowledge of work involving the body, the knowledge of work which is concentrated and unified, and the knowledge of hidden struggles against it; pertaining to gnostic stage, the knowledge of the luminous service which is in God and takes place on its own in God. This is described as “spiritual conduct” and “wonder”⁹⁶⁹.

Isaac uses the same division in different ways and expresses it with different languages. Below is another suggestive paragraph to argue the presence of the Evagrian legacy: “Bodily discipline⁹⁷⁰ in silence purifies the body from material elements. Discipline of the mind⁹⁷¹ humbles the soul and purifies it from the heaviness that leads to decaying things, by changing its passions into impulses of contemplation⁹⁷². This will bring the soul close to the nakedness of mind⁹⁷³ that is called immaterial contemplation⁹⁷⁴. This is the spiritual discipline⁹⁷⁵”. Isaac describes this last level as “the sight of the unspeakable glory”⁹⁷⁶ and “it spiritually delights in the hope of the future things”⁹⁷⁷. The bodily discipline and the discipline of the soul correspond to praktiki and the material contemplation, while the spiritual discipline and the vision of the divine glory to the spiritual contemplation.

There is an interesting detail here referring to the second conduct. He names this stage “conduct of the mind / thought (ܬܚܝܬܐ)”, not soul as in other cases. But in the same discourse, a few lines below, he asserts: “This is the labour of the heart (ܬܠܡܐ ܕܠܒ), which is called the discipline⁹⁷⁸ of the mind/ thought (ܬܚܝܬܐ ܕܬܚܝܬܐ)... which is called psychic service (ܬܠܡܐ ܕܠܒܐܝܬܐ)”.

⁹⁶⁸ II, 3.1,5; In Evagrian terms, the four transformations are: “de la malice à la vertu; de l’impassibilité à la contemplation naturelle seconde ; le passage de celle-ci à la science qui concerne les logikoi ; le passage à la science de la Trinité Sainte ”/ KG 2,4 (S₁).

⁹⁶⁹ II, 10,1.

⁹⁷⁰ ܬܚܝܬܐ ܕܬܚܝܬܐ.

⁹⁷¹ ܬܚܝܬܐ ܕܬܚܝܬܐ.

⁹⁷² ܬܚܝܬܐ ܕܬܚܝܬܐ ܕܬܚܝܬܐ.

⁹⁷³ ܬܚܝܬܐ ܕܬܚܝܬܐ ܕܬܚܝܬܐ; For Isaac the nakedness of the mind is its divestiture of the senses that occurs in the passage from the second to the first natural contemplation. However, Evagrius, despite the fact he argues the angelic powers are bodiless and the angelic bodies that they do have are not at all sensible, yet he considers the first natural contemplation to be material.

⁹⁷⁴ ܬܚܝܬܐ ܕܬܚܝܬܐ.

⁹⁷⁵ ܬܚܝܬܐ ܕܬܚܝܬܐ.

⁹⁷⁶ ܬܚܝܬܐ ܕܬܚܝܬܐ.

⁹⁷⁷ I, 40, p. 202 (B, 303).

⁹⁷⁸ Isaac uses as synonyms conduct (discipline) – ܬܚܝܬܐ, labour – ܬܠܡܐ, and service – ܬܠܡܐ ܕܠܒܐܝܬܐ.

blessed light... and it returns to its original state”⁹⁸⁵. Virtue is the natural health of the soul, and passion is its sickness. Isaac shares the opinion that there are passions of the soul, but that they are called so because of the close connection between body and soul⁹⁸⁶. We must emphasize that the term that describes the passion (ܠܥܡܠܐ)⁹⁸⁷ is ambivalent, firstly it refers to a natural capacity of the soul that can be directed towards both good and evil, as well as a sinful desire of the body or soul. Patrick Hagman argues that in Isaac’s case the tension between them is lessened, taking into account his vision on God and the relativity of evil. Ultimately, in the line of John the Solitary, or more, of Theodore’s pedagogical history, Isaac states that God has given the passions for the benefit of humans: “All the existing passions were given to be of help to each of the natures to which they naturally belong and they were given by God for the growth of these natures”⁹⁸⁸. However, at times, Isaac uses both perspectives, positive, as well as negative, due to Evagrius⁹⁸⁹.

In this framework, Isaac argues that the latter are given by God for the spiritual growth of the body and soul. In a fragment, the bishop of Nineveh argues that passions such as anger⁹⁹⁰ and choler⁹⁹¹, which are naturally in the soul, are death to the flesh, while carnal passions which corrupt the body are enemies of the soul, referring to St Paul’s words on the enmity between body and soul (Galatians 5:17). Isaac lists some carnal passions: love of richness, gathering of possessions, fatness of the body giving rise to the tendency of carnal desire, love of honor which is the source of envy, exercise government; pride and haughtiness of magistracy; folly, glory among men which is the cause of choler, bodily fear. And then, when he wants to refer to them under a single name, he uses the term “world”⁹⁹².

From a gnoseologic perspective, this stage is conducted by what Isaac calls “a simple knowledge”⁹⁹³, bare of every godly thought”, characterized by zeal for rational wisdom and the wish to be originator of inventions in crafts and learnings, the exercise of dialectics, cunning artifices and intellectual disputes. Isaac uses a symbol to describe this type of knowledge – the paradisiac tree of good and evil, which used to eradicate love⁹⁹⁴. In one way, this knowledge associated with the love of the body, describes the purely rational scientific knowledge, which

⁹⁸⁵ I, 3, p. 15 (B, 22).

⁹⁸⁶ I, 3, p. 16 (B, 23).

⁹⁸⁷ Its radical – ܠܥܡܠܐ – means to suffer”, analogous with the Greek πάθος. Other related terms: ܠܥܡܠܐܐܠܐ (weakness), ܠܥܡܠܐܐܠܐܐܠܐ (temptation).

⁹⁸⁸ I, 3, p. 15 (B, 25).

⁹⁸⁹ Cf. Patrick Hagman, *The asceticism of Isaac of Niniveh*, p. 75.

⁹⁹⁰ ܠܥܡܠܐܐܠܐܐܠܐ / ἐπιθυμία.

⁹⁹¹ ܠܥܡܠܐܐܠܐܐܠܐ / θυμός.

⁹⁹² ܠܥܡܠܐܐܠܐܐܠܐ; I, 2, p. 13 (B, 18-19).

⁹⁹³ ܠܥܡܠܐܐܠܐܐܠܐ ܠܥܡܠܐܐܠܐܐܠܐ.

⁹⁹⁴ I, 51, p. 248 (B, 371).

is accomplished by human's intrinsic powers without any appeal to the theological research instrument of truth – “faith”. He is not against natural or rational knowledge, as we will detail later on, but he considers it incomplete if not connected to the divine things. Or, without involving faith, humility and being supported by ascetical works, when trying to meditate on the divine things, a strictly material knowledge can deviate from the truth into idle deliberations and impure things⁹⁹⁵. Although valid, it is liable to falsehood because of the haughtiness and total confidence in one's own powers that accompanies and characterizes it.

Cleansing of unnatural carnal passions by practicing the virtues of the soul, according to nature, is the first stage of the spiritual itinerary or what Isaac calls the “bodily conduct”, and hence the first level of theological knowledge, that of the soul. This stage is bound to a bodily asceticism, a struggle that aims the replacement of passions with virtues and achieving a natural state.

We will refer now to the soul's stage, and in consequence to the bodily conduct, followed by the soul's discipline. In the Second collection, the first centuria, Isaac proposes a classification of the divine knowledge in two levels: “sensitive”⁹⁹⁶ or “practical”⁹⁹⁷, pertaining to the senses, called virtue, which corresponds to the “second contemplation”, and “intelligible”⁹⁹⁸, called “theoria”⁹⁹⁹, pertaining to understanding. After this classification, he continues the discussion, this time within the first level, and makes a second ranking: material and immaterial practice¹⁰⁰⁰. The evolution of knowledge in this first stage corresponds to the development of virtues: material virtues followed by those immaterial. Then he enunciates specific virtues for each of two levels:

- The material virtues refer to: serving the sick people, receiving strangers, giving support to the poor and comfort to the afflicted, instructing those in need. In fact, this list resumes the biblical text from Matthew 25. All these virtues are external and, in fact, this marks the difference between the two types of ascetic works.
- Immaterial virtues, with a deep inner character: chastity, fasting, tears, reading, liturgical service, silence, prayer.

⁹⁹⁵ I, 51, p. 249 (B, 372).

⁹⁹⁶ ἡθελησάντων ἡρώων.

⁹⁹⁷ ἡθελησάντων.

⁹⁹⁸ ἡθελησάντων ἡρώων.

⁹⁹⁹ ἡθελησάντων.

¹⁰⁰⁰ ἡθελησάντων ἡρώων; II, 3.3, 56-58. Approximately the same list in I, 51, p. 250 (B, 372).

At the end of this enumeration, Isaac clearly mentions the aim of both material and immaterial virtues – the liberation of the intellect from materiality so as to be able to come closer to the second rank of knowledge, contemplation, on which we will dwell later on.

Isaac dedicates an entire chapter to the forms of the ascetical progress, envisaging the scope of each virtue within the tripartite schema. Below is a synthesis:

- the bodily conduct envisages the cleansing of the body from the material elements in it, by means of bodily labors;
- the soul's conduct (of mind) is achieved in humility, by filtering the passionate thoughts through meditation on judgment, on God's providence, unceasing prayer of the heart, avoidance of thin passions; its purpose is to acquire subtle heart;
- spiritual conduct refers to achieving the nakedness of mind and the immaterial contemplation¹⁰⁰¹ of the Spirit; it is the foretaste of the eschatological life; without senses – “hypostatical vision”¹⁰⁰², “monadic knowledge”¹⁰⁰³, and “wonder before God”¹⁰⁰⁴.

The work of virtue is called “the knowledge of labours”¹⁰⁰⁵, because it concerns the material purification by means of personal works, in order to become capable of contemplating God. The key term that describes the works of the first two stages, in particular, and the third one, in a specific form (limpidity) is purification: firstly, the purification of the body, by personal works; then the psychic purification, from the hidden affection of the soul. This conduct presupposes turning the heart from preternatural affections and, in consequence, getting the capability of experiencing some spiritual insights. If the first and the second level of purity do not necessarily require an exceptional spiritual maturity (even children are pure in body and soul, but not spiritually), the third level (here purity of mind) is experienced only by the spiritual elites. In the final fragment of 40th discourse of the First collection, Isaac precisely dwells on these three levels of purification:

Bodily purity¹⁰⁰⁶ is to be clean from filth. Psychic purity¹⁰⁰⁷ is to be free from hidden affection¹⁰⁰⁸ in the spirit¹⁰⁰⁹. Purity of mind¹⁰¹⁰ is to be purified by revelations¹⁰¹¹ from

¹⁰⁰¹ כְּלִימָה כְּלִי מַעֲרֵכָה.

¹⁰⁰² כְּסֻמָּה כְּלִימָה.

¹⁰⁰³ כְּחִסְדֵּי כְּחִסְדֵּי.

¹⁰⁰⁴ כְּמַלְכָּה כְּיִמָּה; I, 40, p. 202 (B, 303-304).

¹⁰⁰⁵ כְּסֻמָּה כְּחִסְדֵּי.

¹⁰⁰⁶ כְּיִצְחָה כְּחִסְדֵּי.

¹⁰⁰⁷ כְּחִסְדֵּי כְּסֻמָּה.

¹⁰⁰⁸ כְּסֻמָּה כְּסֻמָּה.

any emotion unto things which, in view of their material nature, lie in the domain of senses... Purity of mind is perfection through training of the heavenly contemplation¹⁰¹², so that the mind without the senses receives impulses from the spiritual powers of those worlds above, powers which are amazing, surpassing in number, distinguished in demeanor, mingled in invisible service, subject to many variations at all times, on account of the motion of the divine revelations¹⁰¹³.

From the excerpt above, we can draw some important methodological conclusions. The purification in the first two levels pertains mostly to human's inner powers, and it is achieved by means of senses, but the purity of mind (spirit) is generated by the direct divine intervention and it is senseless. The frame of the purified mind is represented by "heavenly contemplations". Divine action, called "revelation" occurs here, achieved when one receives impulses from the spiritual powers. It is also useful to underline that here, for the perfect conduct, Isaac uses the expression "purity of intellect (ܠܡܥܠܐ), while, in some other cases, he speaks about the purity of spirit or the purity of heart. Again, there is another important consequence that Isaac proposes – a synthetic lecture of both Evagrian cognitive philosophical language as well as John the Solitary's ascetical terminology, who stresses the role of the heart.

In this context, one finds it necessary to dwell on the way Isaac describes the purity of heart and the relation he establishes between these two faculties. When speaking about the purity of heart, as the main characteristic of the perfect conduct, Isaac clearly advocates its superiority, as including all the other cognitive powers; it is the center of spiritual life¹⁰¹⁴. The moment other powers of the soul are clean, one needs a clear heart too. The bishop of Nineveh describes a pure heart¹⁰¹⁵ as "limpid thinking"¹⁰¹⁶, without any struggle, without temptation of the will or the memories left by the body in the mind¹⁰¹⁷.

In synthesis to all what has been dealt with in this chapter, we will try to identify some methodological elementary differences between the psychic stage¹⁰¹⁸ and the spiritual stage

¹⁰⁰⁹ In Syriac ܠܡܥܠܐ – thought.

¹⁰¹⁰ ܠܡܥܠܐ ܠܡܥܠܐ.

¹⁰¹¹ ܠܡܥܠܐ.

¹⁰¹² ܠܡܥܠܐ ܠܡܥܠܐ.

¹⁰¹³ I, 40, p. 204 (B, 306-307).

¹⁰¹⁴ "Purity of mind is something else than purity of heart as it is a difference between one members of the whole body and the wholly body. The thought (ܠܡܥܠܐ) is one of the senses of the soul. The heart (ܠܡ) is the *central organ of the inner senses*, because it is the root. If the root is holy so are the branches" / I, 3, p. 20 (B, 29).

¹⁰¹⁵ ܠܡܥܠܐ.

¹⁰¹⁶ ܠܡܥܠܐ ܠܡܥܠܐ.

¹⁰¹⁷ II, 3.4, 33.

¹⁰¹⁸ I refer here at the practical stage or the bodily and the soul's conduct and the contemplative stage or the spiritual conduct.

that will help us later identify, delineate and interpret the cognitive levels or forms professed by Isaac.

The stage of the soul	Spiritual stage
Praxis (ܦܪܝܟܬܐ)	Contemplation/ divine vision (ܡܕܝܢܐ ܕܥܝܢܐ)
Purification (ܦܘܪܝܬܐ)	Limpidity (ܦܠܝܬܐ)
Pure prayer (ܦܘܪܝܬܐ ܦܪܝܬܐ)	Spiritual prayer (ܦܪܝܬܐ ܦܪܝܬܐ)
Meditation (ܡܕܝܢܐ)	Wonder (ܡܡܝܬܐ)
Knowledge (ܡܠܝܬܐ)	Ignorance/ un-knowldge (ܡܠܝܬܐ ܠܐ)
Movement/ impulse (ܡܠܝܬܐ)	Drunkenness (ܡܠܝܬܐ)
Speech/ word (ܡܠܝܬܐ)	Silence (ܡܠܝܬܐ)
Justice (ܡܠܝܬܐ)	Mercy/ charity (ܡܠܝܬܐ / ܡܠܝܬܐ)

5.3.1 Bodily asceticism

We now briefly refer to the forms of asceticism related to bodily discipline. Firstly, we recall the labour of fasting and vigil. In discourse 35 of the First collection, the bishop of Nineveh dedicates generous space to the practice of fasting and vigil and describes the role these works occupy in the spiritual maturation. Together with vigilance and vigil, fasting is the foundation of every virtue and each struggle, the path of purity and virginity, the generator of prayer, the source of placidity and the path for humility of heart¹⁰¹⁹. Watchfulness is closely associated with the unification of the mind; it is experienced in silence and, in its turn, it generates the zeal for other ascetic labours¹⁰²⁰. Vigil brings the same effect as vigilance. If the former is considered a permanent state, described as a particular continuous attention before possible temptations, the latter is an exercise that, most of the time, is accompanied by the recitation of psalms and night prayer. The primary purpose of this exercise is the enlightenment of thinking¹⁰²¹.

Reading of the Psalms, a chief occupation of the monks and the reading of Scripture, both have the same goal – the unification of thoughts and staying away from any filthy or worldly thinking¹⁰²². It can easily be seen that, whatever bodily labour we speak about, it has

¹⁰¹⁹ I, 35, p. 142 (B, 162).

¹⁰²⁰ I, 45, p. 300 (B, 447-448).

¹⁰²¹ I, 4, p. 30 (B, 43).

¹⁰²² I, 80, p. 367 (B, 547).

no other purpose than to facilitate and ensure the asceticism of the mind and, consequently, the contemplation specific to the spiritual conduct.

Besides physical labours already mentioned, Isaac insists much on the separation from the world, observing the discipline of silence and the struggle against thoughts. It is useful to recall that the Syriac term that names the work of silence, with the Greek equivalent hesychia, ܠܚܝܬܐ, covers both the state of loneliness, as well as inner unification. One may argue that the first case, the state of loneliness, is the form in which the second, the inner unification, occurs. Hence the name of a hermit – monk¹⁰²³ – is different from he who lives a cenobitic monastic life¹⁰²⁴. Withdrawal from the world does not consist in a running from a specific mode of life, but more the creation of a propitious space for inner unification. Related to this issue, when asked about why some who, despite labouring in harsh ascetic life fail to deliver the passions and to unify their thoughts, Isaac simply responds by stressing that the sensitive passions, the hidden passions, can be cured by bodily labours unless they are accompanied by silence and solitude¹⁰²⁵. Loneliness is considered to be an inner experience of meeting with oneself, a process of achieving lucidity, and, finally, the necessary context required to getting into contact with divinity. In parallel, it means sacrificing the other, even a friend or a relative, and, finally, renouncing the world so as to achieve the unity with God. When talking about the world, Isaac refers, on the one hand, with a generic term, to the passions that characterize the fallen creation, as we have seen above, but, on the other hand, especially addressing the anchorites, to any foreign activity regarding the primary purpose of the hermitical life, that is to reach spiritual experiences: “Be constantly occupied with recitation and solitude then you will be drawn to ecstasy at all times”. Withdrawal in solitude is, according to Isaac, a prerequisite for meeting with God, and therefore practiced in various forms, even extreme ones, in terms of ascetic life.

According to the monastic rule of Abraham of Kashkar¹⁰²⁶, a novice had to devote a community life for a number of years and only after this training he was allowed to retire, with the approval of his spiritual father, in the wilderness, joining the community only for Sunday Eucharist. Such discipline was probably observed by Isaac as well, when he withdrew from the see of Niniveh in the mountains near the Monastery of Rabban Shabur. The following paragraph seems suggestive for Isaac’s vision regarding the solitary and hesychast life, stating its primacy even against the service of the poor, aspect specific for the hermitical

¹⁰²³ ܠܚܝܬܐ.

¹⁰²⁴ ܠܚܝܬܐ.

¹⁰²⁵ I, 35, p. 243 (B, 163-164).

¹⁰²⁶ For details see Sabino Chialà, *Abramo di Kashkar e la sua comunità*, Monastero di Bose, Qiqajon, 2006.

way of life: “Love the ease of solitude rather than satisfying the hunger of the world and the converting of a multitude of heathen peoples from erring unto adoring God”¹⁰²⁷. Solitude is the condition for both conducts, of the body as well as of the soul. Isaac argues that “the silent life is helpful because it silences the deliberations with force and gives us strength to train ourselves in endurance”¹⁰²⁸. The order of solitude generates strength and endurance in physical labours and sufferings (bodily conduct), and cleans the deliberations (psychic discipline). Any physical work is subjected to the noetic asceticism, which is the frame for the spiritual conduct.

Loneliness refers both to a physical location, but more to a state far from the noise and temptations of the world, which pertains to introspection and unification. Isaac repeatedly claims that the monk’s cell is the ascetic desert where one receives the divine revelation. Using biblical symbols, he describes the cell assimilating it to the rock cave¹⁰²⁹ where Moses saw God’s back: “The cell of a solitary (بستاني) is the cave of the rock in which God spoke with Moses”¹⁰³⁰.

We will refer now, in the same context, to the types of prayer pertaining to bodily conduct. A special place is occupied by the reading of the psalms. The Book of Psalms was the most recited book from the Old Testament, especially within the liturgical service. Moreover, the testimony Isaac brings us leads us to believe that the psalms occupied a central place in the seven daily offices; being their very content, interrupted only by prostrations, meditations and free prayers¹⁰³¹. He repeatedly emphasizes the role they occupy in the ascetic life: “Recitation of the Psalms is the root of discipline”¹⁰³². Only in the First collection, Isaac mentions more than thirty times this Old-Testamentary book.

Besides the prayer of the psalms, the bishop of Niniveh adds other forms of prayer, which still correspond to bodily asceticism. On several occasions, he speaks about hymns¹⁰³³, meditation on Scripture¹⁰³⁴, recitation of verses, the work of repentance by sorrow for sins,

¹⁰²⁷ I, 5, p. 32 (B, 45).

¹⁰²⁸ I, 39, p. 198 (B, 297).

¹⁰²⁹ بستان.

¹⁰³⁰ I, 24, p. 121 (B, 178). Sabino Chialá asserts that Isaac quotes an ancient father who says: “The cell of the monk is the furnace of Babylon where the three young man found the Son of God; it is the light column from where God has spoken to Moses”. (see S. Chialá, *Dall’ascesi eremitica*, note 182, p. 325, cf. Paul Bedjan, *Acta martyrum et sanctorum VII*, Parisiis-Lipsiae, Harrassowitz, 1890-7, p. 463)

¹⁰³¹ I, 80, p. 374 (B, 558).

¹⁰³² I, 65, p. 300 (B, 447).

¹⁰³³ I, 25, p. 163 (B, 242).

¹⁰³⁴ He dedicates an entire discourse on “On the words of the Scripture being spoken as it were to patients”, I, 10, p. 78-80 (B, 115-119); Many quotations references appear at the end of his published discourses.

kneeling and other various forms¹⁰³⁵. The meditation of Scripture as a form of prayer has the same goal – the purification of the mind: the meditation of the Scripture “traces in the intellect profitable recollection with regard to watchfulness against the affections and for perpetual abiding with God in love and purity of prayer”¹⁰³⁶.

Regarding prostrations and kneeling, they are part of the regular program of any ascetic. Particular emphasis is given to the prostrations before the Cross, considered as the place where God reveals himself, the “Shekina” of the New Covenant. The discipline evoked by Isaac, describing the practice of the spiritual fathers who preceded him, gives evidence about the alternation of prayers and prostrations before the cross and its worship. The goal is the same – to polish the mind and achieve sight and fervent deliberations¹⁰³⁷.

Tears, accompanied by the regret for sins, are a valuable indication that a person comes closer to the conduct of the soul. One should emphasize that the bishop of Nineveh speaks about two types of tears – the first category accompanies the penitence for sins, while the second is an effect of the intervention of grace. At the bodily ascetic level, it refers to crying, being aware of the fallen condition and the separation from God. Even etymologically, the Syriac term describing the monk might be rendered with ܐܒܝܠܐ – the one who cries. In the 35th discourse of the First collection Isaac himself describes the work of the solitary, using this etymology. He rhetorically asks: “What is the meditation of the solitary in his cell other than weeping?... For his dwelling place lonely like the grave and deprived of all worldly pleasures teaches his that his service consists in weeping. And even his name turns him into his direction; for he is called *abila* (ܐܒܝܠܐ), which means bitter in heart”¹⁰³⁸.

If the ascetic begins by weeping for sins, this labour, under the overshadowing of the Holy Spirit, becomes a spiritual crying. The difference between these two kinds of weeping is essential – if the former is correlated with suffering and grieving, the latter brings comfort. The ascetic is part of a transformation, as the intervention of the Spirit, generates a “spiritual sensitivity”¹⁰³⁹, which allows him to perceive the reality of God as a concrete and immediate

¹⁰³⁵ For other various forms of asceticism see I, 80, 366 et all (B, 546 et).

¹⁰³⁶ I, 53, p. 254 (B, 379).

¹⁰³⁷ I, 15, p. 87 (B, 128).

¹⁰³⁸ I, 35, p. 169 (B, 251-252).

¹⁰³⁹ This comes in the line of Macarius who employs key terms for denoting a vivid experience: αἴσθησις (feeling or sensation), πληροφορία (confidence or assurance), πείρα (experience). Although Macarius used terms that occur in ancient writings, he was able to bring together the emotional, intellectual and spiritual aspects of Christian life. For details see Columba Stewart, *Working the Earth of the Heart: The Messalian Controversy in History, Texts and Language to AD 431*, Oxford, 1991, p. 96-97, 154, 236-237.

sweetness, but not through bodily senses. This occurs when one reaches the purity of the soul¹⁰⁴⁰.

5.3.2 *The noetic asceticism*

We will refer now to the asceticism according to the soul's conduct or the noetic level. If the very purpose of bodily asceticism is the purification of the body, this stage aims at the purification of human's noetic part. Isaac defines the purity of thought (ܬܚܝܬܐ) ¹⁰⁴¹ as "being captivated by divine things that is only reached when many virtues have been practised"¹⁰⁴². As it has been mentioned in the previous chapter dedicated to terminology, this term – thinking (mind) – refers to what is happening during the process and, more specifically, the appearance and the movement of thought. Isaac excludes the idea that speaking about a pure thinking means there are no deliberations or temptations at all, while still being in the body¹⁰⁴³. The solution he proposes is to draw the mind towards excellent things seen by the intuition¹⁰⁴⁴, so that it may become completely overwhelmed by the participation to the divine realities, so any contact with the outside world becomes insignificant for him.

Referring to the intellect's (ܬܚܝܬܐ) purity, we remember that the intellect is the highest noetic faculty which, according to Isaac, is capable to see the spiritual realities. Its purity is achieved when the mind is trained with heavenly contemplations¹⁰⁴⁵ and is moved by the spiritual powers¹⁰⁴⁶, beyond the senses. The purification of this faculty is due to the Holy Spirit. While developing it within a specifically ascetic framework, presupposing an ascetical struggle, Isaac insists that it is the result of the revelations¹⁰⁴⁷ of the divine mysteries¹⁰⁴⁸. And

¹⁰⁴⁰ I, 35, p. 165 (B, 245-248).

¹⁰⁴¹ See the Evagrian concept of "naked mind": "The naked mind (*nous*) is that which, by the contemplation which concerns it, is united to the gnosis of the Holy Trinity" (KG III, 6), developed also by Isaac: "Bodily discipline in solitude purifies the body from the material elements in it. Mental discipline makes the soul humble and purifies it from the material impulses that tend towards decaying things, by changing their affectible nature into motions of contemplation. And this will bring the soul near to the nakedness of the mind (ܬܚܝܬܐ ܬܠܝܬܐ) that is called immaterial contemplation; this is spiritual discipline. It elevates the intellect above earthly things and brings it near to primordial spiritual contemplation; it directs the intellect towards God by the sight of unspeakable glory and it delights spiritually in the hope of future things, [thinking of] what and how each of them will be" (I, 40, p. 202/ B, 303); "When the mind is in a state of natural steadfastness, it is in angelic contemplation, which is the first and natural contemplation which is also named naked mind" (ܬܚܝܬܐ ܬܠܝܬܐ) / I, 3, p. 21 (B, 31).

¹⁰⁴² I, 3, p. 19 (B, 27).

¹⁰⁴³ Isaac identifies four roots for the contrary deliberations: the order of nature, the world through the intermediation of the senses, recollections and powers of deviation and the demons.

¹⁰⁴⁴ The Syriac term might be better rendered with lightning flashes (ܬܚܝܬܐ).

¹⁰⁴⁵ ܬܚܝܬܐ ܬܠܝܬܐ.

¹⁰⁴⁶ ܬܚܝܬܐ ܬܠܝܬܐ.

¹⁰⁴⁷ ܬܚܝܬܐ.

¹⁰⁴⁸ I, 40, p. 204 (B, 306-307).

finally, intellectual activity ceases at the time of entry into the state of stupor¹⁰⁴⁹ when the divine vision¹⁰⁵⁰ occurs.

The second faculty of the soul – the mind (ⲙⲏⲥ) –, which is the spiritual feeling¹⁰⁵¹ and the recipient for the divine power of vision¹⁰⁵², comes very close to the role of the previous one. One can also define it as the power of knowing or the spiritual eye pupils (the power using these pupils is the intellect – ⲙⲓⲛⲓ) or “spiritual nature”¹⁰⁵³ which receives the intelligible revelations¹⁰⁵⁴. Purity of mind means “clearness of the intelligible air”¹⁰⁵⁵. In his First collection, the 67th discourse, Isaac extensively develops the role of mind in the divine knowledge and how this is done. The mind is the power which carries out the “natural knowledge”¹⁰⁵⁶, united with “the natural state”¹⁰⁵⁷ or “natural light”¹⁰⁵⁸. The power that connects knowledge and natural light is grace which gives the capacity of identifying the differences between this light and the spiritual vision. The passions represent the wall that rises between the two. For a pure knowledge one requires a pure mind and the work of the grace. In this discussion, Isaac emphasizes a clear relationship between ascetic work of human and grace, what in ascetic terms we call synergy. Knowledge is based on human labour, but is achieved only in the divine light.

In the next discourse, in the same frame, one can identify the difference between the knowledge of philosophers and the knowledge of the saints, as expressed by Isaac. The psychic knowledge¹⁰⁵⁹, achieved by the natural power of the mind¹⁰⁶⁰, cannot grasp the truth in contemplation (ⲙⲓⲛⲓⲛⲓ) out of the grace¹⁰⁶¹ and excellence of behaviour. This becomes possible only in the case of spiritual people. In parallel, he describes the situation of those philosophically trained¹⁰⁶², who, while being still entangled by bodily affections, have lost their natural power of intellectual vision and, instead of one truth, it appears in a variety of images. He defines the truth as “the apperception (ⲙⲓⲛⲓⲛⲓ) concerning God which a man

¹⁰⁴⁹ ⲙⲓⲛⲓ.

¹⁰⁵⁰ ⲙⲓⲛⲓⲛⲓ; I, 71, p. 330 (B, 492).

¹⁰⁵¹ ⲙⲓⲛⲓⲛⲓ.

¹⁰⁵² ⲙⲓⲛⲓⲛⲓ; I, 66, p. 314 (B, 472).

¹⁰⁵³ ⲙⲓⲛⲓⲛⲓ.

¹⁰⁵⁴ ⲙⲓⲛⲓⲛⲓⲛⲓ; I, 71, p. 328 (B, 489).

¹⁰⁵⁵ ⲙⲓⲛⲓⲛⲓⲛⲓⲛⲓⲛⲓ; I, 67, p. 317 (B, p. 473).

¹⁰⁵⁶ ⲙⲓⲛⲓⲛⲓⲛⲓ.

¹⁰⁵⁷ ⲙⲓⲛⲓⲛⲓⲛⲓ.

¹⁰⁵⁸ ⲙⲓⲛⲓⲛⲓ.

¹⁰⁵⁹ ⲙⲓⲛⲓⲛⲓⲛⲓ.

¹⁰⁶⁰ ⲙⲓⲛⲓⲛⲓⲛⲓ.

¹⁰⁶¹ Divine light – ⲙⲓⲛⲓⲛⲓⲛⲓ.

¹⁰⁶² ⲙⲓⲛⲓⲛⲓⲛⲓ.

personally tastes by the perceptive power of the spiritual senses of the mind”¹⁰⁶³. Therefore, the mind needs, next to its natural powers, the spiritual senses of the mind and, finally, what Isaac calls, “the vision of the mind”¹⁰⁶⁴.

The knowledge of spiritual people has as its final aim the partaking to the divine love in the time of prayer. Love is the reality after which mind longs, either during prayer, or in the impulses of its thoughts. Another aspect under discussion here is the purity of heart¹⁰⁶⁵, as another power directly related to spiritual knowledge, in the experiential line, which Isaac claims to encompass all the other powers of the soul. We recall that the Syriac mystic describes the purity of heart as “a limpid thinking”¹⁰⁶⁶, without struggle... and the reduction of memories that the bodily reality traces in the mind (ܠܡܥܠܐ)”¹⁰⁶⁷. The sign proving that someone has reached this state of purity is the all-encompassing love for the world. Then one “sees all men in good light, without anyone appearing to him unclean or defiled”¹⁰⁶⁸. As the heart, according to the classical ascetic tradition, is the centre of spiritual life (ܠܡܥܠܐ ܕܠܒ), of the inner sense, the sense of senses (ܠܡܥܠܐ ܕܠܡܥܠܐ) it means its purity pertains to the entire being¹⁰⁶⁹. It is achieved only by human’s ascetic struggle – great troubles, separation from the world and complete mortification. From a gnoseological point of view, Isaac describes the achievement of the heart’s purity by returning to an original simplicity and the integrity of nature, which requires the avoidance of the cognitive worldly methods, natural or against nature¹⁰⁷⁰.

We will refer now to the purification of thought (ܠܡܥܠܐ ܕܠܒ)”¹⁰⁷¹. Up to some limits, this power of the soul is circumscribed to a discursive knowledge or a natural knowledge. It is the human faculty of conscious thinking, used in reflection and deliberation. Operating within the borders of rational activity, thinking depends directly on the type of thoughts and the movements generated by them. Isaac states that having pure thinking does not mean the absence of thoughts and movements caused by them, but rather their allegiance to heavenly

¹⁰⁶³ ܠܡܥܠܐ ܠܡܥܠܐ, ܡܥܠܐ ܝܢ ܠܡܥܠܐ ܝܢ; I, 68, p. 318 (B, 475).

¹⁰⁶⁴ ܠܡܥܠܐ ܠܡܥܠܐ.

¹⁰⁶⁵ ܠܡܥܠܐ ܕܠܒ.

¹⁰⁶⁶ ܠܡܥܠܐ ܕܠܒ; While speaking about the heart and its cognitive role, primarily following an experiential line, he correlates it with the Evagrian epistemology, of noetic character – the purity of heart requires the purity of mind, and, in general, the purity of all soul’s powers. The term that seems to support well this connection is “purity” (ܠܡܥܠܐ) itself, translated into Greek with σῶφρονες.

¹⁰⁶⁷ II, 3.4,33.

¹⁰⁶⁸ I, 35, p. 168 (B, 250).

¹⁰⁶⁹ I, 3, p. 20 (B, 29).

¹⁰⁷⁰ I, 35, p. 168 (B, 250).

¹⁰⁷¹ Greek: δίανοια.

realities¹⁰⁷². If for the purification of the intellect and the mind the divine elements seem to prevail, in the sense that they are achieved by the revelations of the divine mysteries, for the purity of thinking what seems to prevail are the human elements or the ascetic noetic exercise. Isaac claims that it can be achieved relatively easy by reading, by a state of vigilance, by physical labours, or all these methods combined¹⁰⁷³.

Finally, we will refer to the purity of thinking/ intelligence (ܠܚܝܬܐ) ¹⁰⁷⁴, power describing what is happening within the thought or, in other words, it refers to the appearance of the thoughts (mentality) or kind of their reservoir. Thought is purified at the same time as thinking through bodily asceticism, meditation on the Scriptures¹⁰⁷⁵, and, finally, through recollection of the future hope¹⁰⁷⁶ towards the life to come.

All four intellectual faculties, next to the heart, are purified by bodily asceticism and, especially, by psychic labours, corresponding to the soul's conduct. The overall goal of this kind of asceticism is the acquisition of a state of stillness of the mind, avoiding the passions and worldly thoughts, and, finally, coming closer to the divine vision¹⁰⁷⁷. As argued above, Isaac speaks about passions of the soul¹⁰⁷⁸, despite the fact they are not natural, but additions to the soul, as indirectly connected with the cognitive process. The most important among them are: envy, vainglory and pride¹⁰⁷⁹. All of these passions are developed at the noetic level, and, in consequence, the struggle against them takes place within the mental activity, through prayer, reading, and knowledge out of the latter two, meditation and contemplation. In this context, the purification of the soul refers to: "be free from hidden affections in the thinking/ spirit"¹⁰⁸⁰.

The purpose of spiritual asceticism envisages the inner unification of noetic faculties and their subordination to the heavenly reality. In Isaac's terms, this process consists in experiencing "the natural stirrings of the rational soul"¹⁰⁸¹, when the power of reason¹⁰⁸² is enlightened, the fear of death disappears and appears the thought on judgment and

¹⁰⁷² I, 3, p. 19 (B, 27).

¹⁰⁷³ I, 3, p. 20 (B, 29).

¹⁰⁷⁴ Greek: φρόνημα.

¹⁰⁷⁵ I, 6, p. 61 (B, 91).

¹⁰⁷⁶ I, 6, p. 63 (B, 63).

¹⁰⁷⁷ II, 3.1,72.

¹⁰⁷⁸ ܠܚܝܬܐ ܕܠܚܝܬܐ.

¹⁰⁷⁹ II, 3.4,27.

¹⁰⁸⁰ I, 40, p. 204 (B, 306). In the same paragraph, Isaac describes the purification of mind by the means of revelations and avoidance of any worldly things.

¹⁰⁸¹ ܠܚܝܬܐ ܕܠܚܝܬܐ ܕܠܚܝܬܐ.

¹⁰⁸² ܠܚܝܬܐ ܕܠܚܝܬܐ.

resurrection. The leading virtue which characterizes this stage is “natural discernment”¹⁰⁸³, when the “natural thoughts”¹⁰⁸⁴ are illumined by the presence of the grace¹⁰⁸⁵.

Isaac describes the signs that accompany this state and puts them in relation to bodily conduct: the state of permanent repentance, acquired by a harsh asceticism and tears, slowly turns into comfort; thought (ܐܬܬܐܠܡ) is delighted by the feeling of hope, thinking (ܐܬܬܬܐܠܡ) can be easily unified; one achieves the vision of mysterious insights¹⁰⁸⁶ contained in the Scriptures and the sensible events, as well as contemplation¹⁰⁸⁷ of ascetic labours; the feeling of delight accompanies the labour, fasting and prayer¹⁰⁸⁸.

One should emphasize that bodily asceticism does not stop at this time, only that it prevails the noetic asceticism. Moreover, Isaac clearly states several times that the purification of the mind is conditioned by bodily purification and that it cannot be achieved without the support of the latter one, but also that bodily labours find their fulfilment in the mind’s works. The same reciprocity can be identified when speaking about the fruits of the bodily knowledge, respectively of the soul. Isaac goes as far as describing this work at the physic level manifested in the external behaviour. In this frame, we can easily identify the relationship between the body and soul, in the context of Isaac’s gnoseological vision. The fragment below seems suggestive to argue this idea:

The ministry of the body¹⁰⁸⁹, when accompanied by idleness of mind (ܐܬܬܐܠܡ) is empty and without any advantage... In the ministry of the mind¹⁰⁹⁰ the body is not without labour either, even though it may be very weak, seeing that the labour of the mind / thought (ܐܬܬܐܠܡ) dries up and emaciates the body making it like dry wood... the following are born in the mind/ thought (ܐܬܬܐܠܡ) in accordance with the various direction meditation takes: grief for the sake of God or joy at Him and a heart that is diffused with the hope for which is continually peering out. With their sharp warmth this suffering and joy scorns and scorched the body drying it up at the seething infusion of blood which provides heat and spreads to the veins; for the flame of the mind’s/ thought’s stirrings¹⁰⁹¹ as a result of the fervour of the hidden ministry heats up the body’s constitution. It causes to burst forth all the time a wondrous sort of transformation... To the same extent the body dries up and grows feeble at these divine

¹⁰⁸³ ܐܬܬܐܠܡ.

¹⁰⁸⁴ ܐܬܬܐܠܡ ܐܬܬܐܠܡ.

¹⁰⁸⁵ II, 20, 2-3.

¹⁰⁸⁶ ܐܬܬܐܠܡ ܐܬܬܐܠܡ.

¹⁰⁸⁷ ܐܬܬܐܠܡ.

¹⁰⁸⁸ II, 3.4,44.

¹⁰⁸⁹ ܐܬܬܐܠܡ ܐܬܬܐܠܡ; See also II, 3.3,52; II, 29,1.

¹⁰⁹⁰ ܐܬܬܐܠܡ ܐܬܬܐܠܡ.

¹⁰⁹¹ ܐܬܬܐܠܡ ܐܬܬܐܠܡ; See II, 3.2,45; II, 29,3.

*transformations so the soul is renewed day by day and flourishes through progress towards God in its spiritual knowledge*¹⁰⁹².

A pure soul, a pure heart and a pure mind makes the ascetic opened to receive divine visions and revelations. Moreover, there is concrete evidence of having achieved the intermediate ascetical state. In the context of this analysis, “visions” (ܐܝܬܐ) and “revelation” (ܐܝܬܐ) are tightly inter-connected. Although Isaac sometimes gives the impression that they are synonyms, the second one includes the first one. The fundamental difference between the two consists in the nature of the experience¹⁰⁹³ – the first one describes an inner mystical experience, while the latter refers to the immaterial exterior appearances (saints, angels, martyrs)¹⁰⁹⁴. The revelations, according to the bishop of Nineveh, are anticipating the kingdom of God on earth. But they are of two types: revelations “of the new world” and “about the new world”. If the first one refers to the “glorious nature of the divine Majesty”, the latter category concerns “wondrous transformations which creation will experience”. Both are perceived by the intellect (ܐܝܬܐ) through the revelation of the various insights (ܐܝܬܐ), the results of continual reflection (ܐܝܬܐ) and illumination (ܐܝܬܐ), received from God. We remember that Isaac evokes a type of revelations with images for simple people and a second category without images for perfect people, but by intelligible apperceptions¹⁰⁹⁵. Within the first category, he lists six types of revelations: non-ecstatic revelation perceived with the senses¹⁰⁹⁶, material (the burning bush) and immaterial (Jacob’s ladder, the light that blinded St Paul), an ecstatic vision (Ezekiel’s chariot) perceived as psychic sight¹⁰⁹⁷, by rapture of the spirit (a mental act of being carried away, Paul’s journey to the third heaven)¹⁰⁹⁸, by the rank of prophecy¹⁰⁹⁹, (the case of Balaam), in an intellectual way¹¹⁰⁰, through understanding (Colossians 1:19; Ephesians 1:17-19) and in the likeness of a dream¹¹⁰¹ (Joseph, Nabuchadnezzar, Joseph, Mary’s husband). And precisely, as occurring through image, they are connected with the intermediary state and destined to the simple in understanding for their guidance. But those spiritual, received without images, by the intelligible apperception, refer to the perfection of knowledge, the highest form of understating. In consequence,

¹⁰⁹² ܐܝܬܐ ܐܝܬܐ; II, 24, 1-3. See also II, 3.3,52; I, 15, p. 478.

¹⁰⁹³ Cf. Hilarion Alfeyev, *The spiritual world*, p. 230.

¹⁰⁹⁴ I, 5, p. 45 (B, 65).

¹⁰⁹⁵ I, 19, p. 108 (B, 118-119)

¹⁰⁹⁶ ܐܝܬܐ.

¹⁰⁹⁷ ܐܝܬܐ ܐܝܬܐ.

¹⁰⁹⁸ ܐܝܬܐ ܐܝܬܐ; Literally – of the thinking.

¹⁰⁹⁹ ܐܝܬܐ ܐܝܬܐ.

¹¹⁰⁰ ܐܝܬܐ ܐܝܬܐ.

¹¹⁰¹ ܐܝܬܐ; I, 19, p. 106 (B, 156).

“revelation... is different from truth and knowledge in so far as revelation is not the exact truth, but only shows indications and signs corresponding to human strength... The mysteries¹¹⁰² that are attained by the mind (ܡܢܬܐ) through insights into the divine nature are different from the action by which the intellect (ܡܢܬܐ) is inspired during a certain times. It is not absolutely necessary that everyone to whom a revelation is imparted or who is influenced¹¹⁰³ by a consoling action must know the truth and the exact knowledge¹¹⁰⁴ concerning God”¹¹⁰⁵. Real “knowledge” is concerned with metaphysical issues: his nature, qualities or the understanding of his will towards humankind. These are attained by the mind during “the insights into the divine nature”¹¹⁰⁶, often pictured by Isaac with the term “intuition”, “good rendering”¹¹⁰⁷, as we will see later on.

Despite the fact that the soul’s conduct anticipates certain spiritual experiences, yet it is still under the spectrum of movement, when the human action plays a very significant role, and we have observed that this feature clearly points to the fundamental difference between the two states. Before analysing the last cognitive stage, “the knowledge of the saints” (spiritual knowledge), within the passage of two successive cognitive states – psychic and spiritual – we will deal with the powers of the soul, which are the means that stand at the very base of the gnoseological process. Therefore the next subchapter will be dedicated to some anthropological insights within the East Syriac tradition and the Eastern tradition in general.

5.4 The Powers of the Soul and the Process of Knowledge

The process of knowledge is possible, according to the spiritual Christian tradition, due to revelation, on the one hand, and to an anthropological structure able to communicate with the divinity, on the other hand. This second factor is located in what the philosophical terminology calls “noetic part” of the soul. Specifically, in the Syriac tradition, one speaks about “powers” (ܡܠܚܬܐ), “parts” (ܡܚܬܐ), or energies (ἐνέργειαι), described as cognitive (γνωστικαί), the last two terms borrowed from Greek terminology. In the third chapter above dedicated to Isaac’s terminology, I have already anticipated the anthropological and philological analysis of the most important four modes of knowledge. As a continuation, in this subchapter, I will deal at large with the cognitive powers and their modes of action,

¹¹⁰² ܡܢܬܐ.

¹¹⁰³ ܡܠܚܬܐ (overshadowing).

¹¹⁰⁴ ܡܠܚܬܐ ܡܚܬܐ.

¹¹⁰⁵ I, 19, p. 108-109 (B, p. 160).

¹¹⁰⁶ ܡܠܚܬܐ ܡܚܬܐ ܡܠܚܬܐ ܡܚܬܐ ܡܠܚܬܐ ܡܚܬܐ; I, 19, p. 109 (B, 160).

¹¹⁰⁷ ܡܠܚܬܐ.

interpreted within the Syriac anthropological tradition, trying to identify the common aspects at different authors, as well as the differences and, finally, to point to Isaac's personal way of using them in constructing his anthropological-theological discourse.

If we are to give a definition of what “power” means, we will refer to Pseudo-Michael the Interpreter, who identifies an ontological connection between power and nature. He argues that this term becomes a technical concept to express the generative condition of the acts¹¹⁰⁸ and properties¹¹⁰⁹, intrinsic and connatural: “La puissance est ce qui est dit de la nature et avec la nature, et par rapport à l'individu de la nature, et c'est comme la chaleur pour le feu et la rationalité pour l'ange”¹¹¹⁰. On the evolution of the term in the Syriac theological thinking, Vittorio Berti published an important study last year, dedicated at large to the East Syriac anthropology regarding the problem of death¹¹¹¹. To contextualize the discussion around the cognitive powers in Isaac's perspective, we will synthetically dwell on the evolution of the anthropological terminology and, in particular, on the taxonomies developed by some important writers, as listed by the Italian researcher, and their philosophical sources.

Ephraim the Syrian is the first representative author who deals with this issue. While using an intellectual terminology, he speaks about four powers, described as the noetic part of the soul: ܠܚܝܬܐ – thinking¹¹¹², ܠܡܝܢ – mind¹¹¹³, ܠܚܝܬܐ – thought, and ܠܡܝܢ – intellect¹¹¹⁴. As an evidence of stoicism, Ephraim also speaks about seven senses (the classic five and the language and generation sense)¹¹¹⁵.

A second author, whose traces go back to the Syriac tradition, is Pseudo-Macarius. He interprets Ezekiel's vision in an anthropological key. The four appearances in the first chapter of his book, symbolize the noblest λογισμοί¹¹¹⁶ of the soul: will (Θέλημα), conscience (συνείδησις), intellect (νοῦς) and charity (ἀγαπητική δύναμις)¹¹¹⁷. Instead of energy, he uses the term “dynamis”.

¹¹⁰⁸ ܠܚܝܬܐ.

¹¹⁰⁹ ܠܡܝܢ/ܠܚܝܬܐ.

¹¹¹⁰ Ps.-Michael l'Interprète, Cf. G. Furlani, “ ‘Il libro delle definizioni e divisioni’ di Michele l'Interprete”, *Memorie delle Reale Accademia Nazionale dei Lincei. Classe di Scienze Morali, Storiche e Filologiche* 6 (1926), 2, p. 1-194, here p. 64, 118.

¹¹¹¹ *L'au-delà de l'âme et l'en-deça du corps. Morceaux d'anthropologie chrétienne de la mort dans l'église syro-orientale*, Paradosis 57, Paris, 2014.

¹¹¹² V. Berti – “entendement” (*L'au-delà de l'âme*, p. 76).

¹¹¹³ V. Berti – “connaissance”.

¹¹¹⁴ See the index of Syriac words E. Beck, *Ephräm des Syrers Psychologie und Erkenntnislehre*, CSCO 419/ 58, 1980, p. 183-184.

¹¹¹⁵ E. Beck, *Ephräm des Syrers Psychologie*, p. 1-20.

¹¹¹⁶ Translated as characteristics, affections or passions.

¹¹¹⁷ Ps.-Macaire, *Die 50 Geistlichen Homilien des Makarios*, ed. by H. Dörries, *Patristische Texte und Studien* 4, Walter de Gruyter, Berlin, 1964 p., 2-3; *The Fifty Spiritual Homilies and the Great Letter*, trad. by G. A. Maloney, Paulist Press, Manwah N.J., 1992, p. 36.

John the Solitary, the first synthesizer of the Syriac ascetic theology, mostly involves the term “passion” (ܥܠܝܐ) that, as Berti argues¹¹¹⁸, presumes a connection between the soul’s impulses and the corporal actions. In his work, “Dialogue on the Soul”¹¹¹⁹, he lists three passions: discernment¹¹²⁰, lust¹¹²¹, irascibility¹¹²², reflecting Plato’s three parts of the soul and, consequently, analyzing their negative development, he identifies the sources in human’s nature, in the evil that is mixed with the nature, in the works of the devils and even in the soul¹¹²³.

Jacob of Saroug, a representative theologian of the School of Edessa in northern Syria, speaks about five senses (knowledge¹¹²⁴, intellection¹¹²⁵, discernment¹¹²⁶, intellect¹¹²⁷, mind¹¹²⁸)¹¹²⁹, in the line of Ephraim the Syrian, and eight beauties (ܥܠܝܐ) of the soul (intellect¹¹³⁰, wisdom¹¹³¹, illumination¹¹³², sublime mind¹¹³³, impulses full of discernment¹¹³⁴, speeches¹¹³⁵, voice¹¹³⁶ and spiritual thoughts¹¹³⁷)¹¹³⁸. The variability of the terminology in his thinking demonstrates that there was no stable anthropological-psychological pattern during the fifth-sixth century.

Using a Platonist pattern and following Evagrius¹¹³⁹, some other authors speak about the three parts of the soul: rationality, will and irascibility. Contemporary with the last author mentioned above, Philoxenus of Mabboug evokes the three divisions of the soul and the way

¹¹¹⁸ *L’au-delà de l’âme*, p. 78.

¹¹¹⁹ *Dialogue sur l’âme*, p. 26-27 (48-49).

¹¹²⁰ ܥܠܝܐ.

¹¹²¹ ܥܠܝܐ.

¹¹²² ܥܠܝܐ; He adds also the “intellective power” (ܥܠܝܐ ܕܥܠܝܐ).

¹¹²³ *Dialogue sur l’âme*, p. 39-40 (60) ; Vittorio Berti argues that John the Solitary lists here the opinions spread in his time on the source of passions, synthetized in four general lines: anthropological vision, dualistic vision, demonological vision and psychological vision (*L’au-delà de l’âme*, p. 80).

¹¹²⁴ ܥܠܝܐ.

¹¹²⁵ ܥܠܝܐ.

¹¹²⁶ ܥܠܝܐ.

¹¹²⁷ ܥܠܝܐ.

¹¹²⁸ ܥܠܝܐ.

¹¹²⁹ Jacob of Sarug, *Homiliae Selectae Mar-Jacobi Sarugensis*, ed. by P. Bedjan, vol. I-II, IV, Otto Harrassowitz, Paris, Leipzig, 1905, 1906, 1908, II, 35, p. 77.

¹¹³⁰ ܥܠܝܐ.

¹¹³¹ ܥܠܝܐ.

¹¹³² ܥܠܝܐ.

¹¹³³ ܥܠܝܐ.

¹¹³⁴ ܥܠܝܐ ܕܥܠܝܐ ܕܥܠܝܐ.

¹¹³⁵ ܥܠܝܐ.

¹¹³⁶ ܥܠܝܐ.

¹¹³⁷ ܥܠܝܐ ܕܥܠܝܐ.

¹¹³⁸ *Homiliae Selectae Mar-Jacobi Sarugensis*, I, 30, p. 687-688.

¹¹³⁹ *Praktikos*, SC 171, p. 683-684.

cognitive powers (intellect¹¹⁵⁸, intelligence¹¹⁵⁹ and thinking¹¹⁶⁰)¹¹⁶¹ besides the appetitive powers. What is new and interesting refers to the fact that, in addition to the three appetitive powers, he lists the mind¹¹⁶² as the one that dominates the others.

Before referring to Isaac's vision, we will mention three other important writers dealing with this issue. One of them is Simon Taibuteh, who seems to have known Isaac. He speaks about the existence of two active powers – rationality¹¹⁶³ and vitality¹¹⁶⁴. The first one is specific to the rational beings and becomes manifested by the means of mind¹¹⁶⁵, intellect¹¹⁶⁶, thinking (judgment)¹¹⁶⁷, thoughts¹¹⁶⁸ and discernment¹¹⁶⁹, while the second power corresponds to both the rational and the non-rational beings and is actualized in desire and irascibility¹¹⁷⁰. The desire is stirred up by the senses, and the senses by the union of an outer stimulus with the inner faculties. The irascibility is stirred by desire¹¹⁷¹.

In another place he lists the faculties of the inner man: mind, intelligence, imagination, thoughts, rationality, knowledge, discernment, judgment, understanding and memory. As a physician, in the line of Galen's medical system, he localise the anatomical seat of the soul's powers, arguing that knowledge is acquired by the combination of the senses of the body with the faculties of the soul. The seat of the power of imagery is localised in the fore-part of the brain, the intelligence in the middle part, the memory in the back part. The senses have their seat in the nerves which come out from the brain. They contain also the „animal spirit”, which embraces the motor power and the sensory power. It is a refinement, by the brain, of the „vital spirit” formed in the heart. The last one is also a refinement of the „natural spirit”, which has its seat in the liver. This spirit is curiously described as a fluid or a vapour, carried with the venous blood to the ventricles of the heart, where receives a process of subtilisation or

¹¹⁵⁸ ܡܕܢܐ.

¹¹⁵⁹ ܡܕܢܐܝܬܐ.

¹¹⁶⁰ ܡܕܢܐܝܬܐ.

¹¹⁶¹ Cf. *Mar Barhdbšabba 'Arbaya, évêque de Halwan (VII^e siècle). Cause de la fondation des écoles*, ed. by A. Scher, *Patrologia Orientalis* 4.4, Paris, 1908, p. 341 (27).

¹¹⁶² ܡܕܢܐ.

¹¹⁶³ ܡܕܢܐܝܬܐ.

¹¹⁶⁴ ܡܕܢܐܝܬܐ.

¹¹⁶⁵ ܡܕܢܐ.

¹¹⁶⁶ ܡܕܢܐ.

¹¹⁶⁷ ܡܕܢܐܝܬܐ.

¹¹⁶⁸ ܡܕܢܐܝܬܐ.

¹¹⁶⁹ ܡܕܢܐܝܬܐ.

¹¹⁷⁰ *Woodbroock Studies: Christian Documents in Syriac, Arabic and Garshuni Edited and Translated with a Critical Apparatus, vol. VII: Early Christian Mystics*, ed. and transl. by A. Mingana, Cambridge, 1934, p. 1-69, 280-321, here 49, 308; *Simone di Taibuteh. Violenza e grazia: la coltura del cuore*, transl. P. Bettolo, Collana di testi patristici 102, Città Nuova, Roma, 1992; He changes “will” with “desire”, then introduces “mind” among the rational actions. He also changes “intelligence” (ܡܕܢܐܝܬܐ) with “thinking”.

¹¹⁷¹ *Woodbroock Studies: Christian Documents*, p. 45.

refinement and then it is sent in this state to the brain. The brain has the same function of further subtilisation of this vapour and to send it through the nerves to all parts of the body. Simon describes here the natural function of the soul and, in consequence, the process of the natural human knowledge. He lists three important moments in this process: the first image of the object is formed in the brain, then the brain submits the formed image to its natural function of understanding and grasping its characteristics and, finally, the faculty of memory causes the image impressed on the brain and understood by it. The thickness and dullness of the natural and vital spirit might generate injuries to the performance of the brain in its triple function – imagining, understanding and memorising, as a result of indigestion, concussion and tumor.

There are other important anatomical seats of the soul's powers evoked by Simon: the organs of the will are the nerves and muscles; the centre of the nerves is the brain, of the arteries the heart and of the veins the liver, again in the line of Galen. The seat of feeling is the brain, that of discernment the heart, that of passion in the stomach, of desire in the kidneys and that of the wrath in the liver. A great importance is given to the heart, considered to be the seat of the mind and of discernment, credited with receiveing the good and evil information from outside. It passes them further to mind and thoughts, as the natural mind is the spring of the heart. In this frame, the heart stamps the thoughts and passions that come to it with its comprehension. One may identify in this idea a very important ascetical work – „the guard of the heart/ spirit”, according to Matthew 15:19¹¹⁷².

Another interesting author, mentioned by Vittorio Berti in the aforementioned study, Theodore Bar Koni (8th century), develops an entire system kin to Patriarch Timothy's, as we will show later on. Firstly, he attributes four primary powers to the body, formed out of the mixture of four natural elements: warmth, cold, humidity and dryness. Next to these powers, he adds four characteristics that support the function of the organism – attraction, repulsion, conjunction and disjunction, while mentioning also the desire and the vitality. These generate five operations: irascibility¹¹⁷³, desire¹¹⁷⁴, discernment¹¹⁷⁵, sensitiveness¹¹⁷⁶ and concupiscence¹¹⁷⁷. He also identifies the anatomic places where these five operations take place: curiously, sensitiveness in the brain, discernment in the heart, desire in the stomach,

¹¹⁷² For details see “Mystical works of Simon of Taibutheh. Prefatory note”, in *Woodbroock Studies: Christian Documents*, p. 2-5.

¹¹⁷³ ܐܝܪܥܝܬܐ.

¹¹⁷⁴ ܕܥܝܬܐ.

¹¹⁷⁵ ܕܥܝܬܐܝܬܐ.

¹¹⁷⁶ ܕܥܝܬܐ.

¹¹⁷⁷ ܕܥܝܬܐܝܬܐ.

irascibility in the liver and concupiscence in the kidneys. Finally, he divides the souls' powers in two, and he associates vitality with irascibility and desire, while rationality is associated with will and free choice. The latter one works under four operations: intellect (ܠܡܥܠܐ), mind (ܠܡܢܐ), thinking (ܠܡܚܝܬܐ) and intelligence (ܠܡܚܝܬܐ). By juxtaposing the medical science of his time (connected to the body) with philosophical preoccupation, Theodore speaks about powers and operations of both body and soul¹¹⁷⁸.

Finally, not independently of Isaac's context and theological vision, we will dwell at short on the anthropological perspective of Patriarch Timothy I, within the theological dispute around the divine vision and the condemnation of the mystics in 787. Using mostly a Theodorian pattern¹¹⁷⁹, he defines the soul as "an intelligent, vivant, rational, mobile, immortal, invisible nature, created in the body by the divine will for the fulfilment of the body and to be eternally indissoluble in the Holy Spirit"¹¹⁸⁰. The soul, in his perspective, does not own the body, but rather it is part of the natural and hypostatic composition of the human. Consequently, body and soul together work for the constitution of the human's natural order. The intellect, as cognitive instrument for created things, is interpreted by the mystiques as the highest part of the soul, as well as, occasionally, something qualitatively different, for it is capable of seeing and becoming the place of God. But for Timothy, it is simply something that proceeds out of the soul. He uses a comparison so as to better explain the relation with the soul – the intellect and the word proceed from the soul as the rays and the warmth proceed from the sun¹¹⁸¹. Similarly, he suggests a second comparison, this time using a Trinitarian language; the soul (ܠܡܢܐ) is assimilated with the Father, the word (ܠܡܚܝܬܐ) with the Son and the intellect (ܠܡܥܠܐ) proceeds as the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father. What is interesting here refers to the fact that intellect is the expression of the entire soul and not only of a part of it.

Going further in his psychological-cognitive analysis, he argues the existence of four, occasionally, five, powers of the soul: rationality¹¹⁸², irascibility¹¹⁸³, concupiscence¹¹⁸⁴, will¹¹⁸⁵. One pair pertains to the nature of the soul (rationality and will), while the second pair

¹¹⁷⁸ *Liber Scholiorum*, ed. by A. Scher, CSCO 55/ 19, 1910; transl. *Livre de Scolies (Recension de Séert). I mimrè I-V*, transl. By R. Hespel and E. Dragnet, CSCO 432/ 188, 1982, p. 22 (67).

¹¹⁷⁹ See Vittorio Berti, "Le débat sur la vision de Dieu et la condamnation des mystiques par Timothée 1^{er}: la perspective du patriarche", in Alain Desreumax, *Les mystiques syriaques*, Paris, p. 162.

¹¹⁸⁰ Timothée, *Timothei Patriarchae Epistulae I*, ed. Oscar Brown, Paris, Leipzig, 1914 (1915), CSCO 74/30; 75/31, p. 44 (27).

¹¹⁸¹ Cf. Martin Heimgartner, *Timotheos I., Ostsyrischer Patriarch, Disputation mit dem Kalifen Al-Mahdi*, Louvain, 2011, CSCO 631-632/ 244-245, p. 23-24 (22-23).

¹¹⁸² ܠܡܥܠܐ.

¹¹⁸³ ܠܡܚܝܬܐ.

¹¹⁸⁴ ܠܡܢܐ.

¹¹⁸⁵ ܠܡܚܝܬܐ.

(irascibility and concupiscence) are assigned to the soul by its union with the body. Those which belong to the very soul are permanent, but the second pair ceases to exist the moment the body dies. All faculties have a double dimension – power and act. Therefore, the first couple (pair) persists as power after the death of the body, while the second disappears entirely (power and act). At this point, the fifth power called vitality¹¹⁸⁶ or movement, which maintains its existence in both forms even after the migration of the soul¹¹⁸⁷. After this decisive moment, one speaks about the soul's repose, described as an unconscious presence. The patriarch clearly asserts that there is no knowledge and vision out of the body. After resurrection, the cognitive powers regain the second dimension of their existence – the act, and so the human will be able to experience intellection and vision. The Patriarch's anthropological theory on the cognitive powers depends completely on the hypostatic composition¹¹⁸⁸.

We now turn to Isaac, who seems to have a clearer perception of the cognitive powers of the soul. In the Second collection, in the third centuria, he lists five powers and the way they work in the cognitive process. The fragment below refers to these five powers:

Cinque sone le potenze dell'anima, che l'anima dotata di ragione possiede nell'essenza congiunta, cioè il desiderio naturale¹¹⁸⁹ - dico (quello) dell'anima-; la potenza irascibile¹¹⁹⁰, sua ausilaria – il furore infatti è naturalmente ordinato a muoversi dopo il desiderio -; il moto della vitalità¹¹⁹¹, che freme in lei senza quiete; la razionalità semplice¹¹⁹² e la razionalità composta¹¹⁹³. Due delle cinque potenze dell'anima cessano con la sua separazione dal corpo in una distinzione perfetta: sono la potenza irascibile e la razionalità composta. Nessuna di loro è infatti utile alla condotta futura: lì non v'è alcunché che la voce proclami, né alcuna opposizione alle cose buone contro cui sia d'utilità lo zelo. Altre due di loro, ancora, sono custodite senza fremito fino al tempo successivo alla resurrezione, cioè fino all'uso del mondo futuro. Tutto l'uso della condotta che è nei cieli risiede infatti in esse: una è la razionalità semplice, che è l'intelletto gnostico¹¹⁹⁴ in cui (l'anima) è mossa nella contemplazione¹¹⁹⁵ di quell'Essenza che è tutto il fine del regno dei cieli ed entro il cui stupore¹¹⁹⁶ è serbato l'intelletto di tutti gli esseri dotati di ragione, primi e ultimi; (l'altra è) il desiderio della sua natura¹¹⁹⁷, da cui è mosso il piacere per la grande carità¹¹⁹⁸ del Creatore, da cui

¹¹⁸⁶ ܠܚܝܬܐ.

¹¹⁸⁷ Timothée, *Timothei Patriarchae Epistulae I*, p. 50-52 (32).

¹¹⁸⁸ Vittorio Berti, *Le débat sur la vision de Dieu*, p. 67-68.

¹¹⁸⁹ ܠܚܝܬܐ ܠܚܝܬܐ.

¹¹⁹⁰ ܠܚܝܬܐ ܠܚܝܬܐ.

¹¹⁹¹ ܠܚܝܬܐ ܠܚܝܬܐ ܠܚܝܬܐ.

¹¹⁹² ܠܚܝܬܐ ܠܚܝܬܐ.

¹¹⁹³ ܠܚܝܬܐ ܠܚܝܬܐ.

¹¹⁹⁴ ܠܚܝܬܐ ܠܚܝܬܐ.

¹¹⁹⁵ ܠܚܝܬܐ ܠܚܝܬܐ.

¹¹⁹⁶ ܠܚܝܬܐ ܠܚܝܬܐ.

¹¹⁹⁷ ܠܚܝܬܐ ܠܚܝܬܐ.

allora sarà (resa) perfetta tutta la natura degli uomini e insieme degli angeli e (dei) demoni. Gli angeli sono in essa anche ora, compiutamente; gli uomini di tempo in tempo; i demoni nient'affatto, ma saranno (resi) perfetti (in essa) da ultimo per la grazia di Colui che li ha creati. Resta solo una tra tutte (le potenze) naturali dell'anima che, sola, rimane con essa nella separazione dal corpo, finché non accolga di nuovo il suo coniuge, al forte cenno del Creatore, ed è il motto dela vitalità. Quest'unica (potenza) resta preso di lei fin qui, e con essa (l'anima) cinge l'altro mondo. L'anima che ha peccato ed è stata giustificata con il corpo, non è giusto che riceva da sola sofferenza e gioia¹¹⁹⁹.

One can observe from the paragraph above that the bishop of Niniveh lists five cognitive powers just as patriarch Timothy does, and yet there are some differences. The vitality is common and it is destined to a continuous work. From the first couple, the will disappears, and Isaac divides the rational power in two parts – simple and composed rationality with different duration. The first one continues its existence even after the death of the body, while the second ceases its existence in the moment the soul migrates from the body. This occurs as the latter one pertains to the knowledge of the created beings and become superfluous after death. The desire, considered as natural for the soul, goes beyond death, but irascibility, as after death there is no contradiction, is no longer necessary.

We identify here the synthesis Isaac makes between the noetic perspective (centred on the intellects/ *nous*) and the line called “the school of feeling” (centred on the heart). The knowledge in the life to come is achieved by the simple rationality that is “the gnostic intellect”¹²⁰⁰ during and by means of the divine vision¹²⁰¹ and wonder¹²⁰², respectively, by natural desire, in the pleasure of the divine charity¹²⁰³.

In the same framework, Isaac speaks about five gifts that the human was given in order to be able to attend to the divine knowledge. In the Second collection, 18th discourse, he lists them: life¹²⁰⁴, sense perception¹²⁰⁵, reason¹²⁰⁶, free will¹²⁰⁷ and authority¹²⁰⁸, so that the human

¹¹⁹⁸ כִּי מֵאֵלֶּיךָ רִחֵקֶנּוּ.

¹¹⁹⁹ II, 3.3, 76-77.

¹²⁰⁰ רִחֵקֶנּוּ רִחֵקֶנּוּ.

¹²⁰¹ רִחֵקֶנּוּ.

¹²⁰² רִחֵקֶנּוּ.

¹²⁰³ כִּי מֵאֵלֶּיךָ רִחֵקֶנּוּ.

¹²⁰⁴ רִחֵקֶנּוּ.

¹²⁰⁵ רִחֵקֶנּוּ יָדָא.

¹²⁰⁶ רִחֵקֶנּוּ.

¹²⁰⁷ רִחֵקֶנּוּ.

¹²⁰⁸ רִחֵקֶנּוּ.

is able to enjoy “the delight of intelligence”¹²⁰⁹ and “the pleasure of the gifts of insight”^{1210,1211}.

The very scope of the cognitive powers is clearly expressed by the bishop of Niniveh – to achieve the state of the angels, described following the two directions underlined above, that is “perfection of love”¹²¹² and “passionless mind”¹²¹³ – “excelling knowledge”¹²¹⁴, “a perfect state of knowledge”¹²¹⁵ and “insatiable love”^{1216,1217}.

In addition to the five powers evoked above, Isaac employs the four terms already mentioned above, borrowed from the ascetical literature, to describe the soul’s mental and spiritual faculties, expression or modes of acting of the cognitive powers: *רום*, *לבו*, *לבי*, *לבינה*, by which human “knows”. I will not dwell on them, as I have already analysed them at large in the chapter dedicated to terminology. At this point we will only recall a fragment where one may find all these four terms together, so as to illustrate the connections and the differences between them, pointing to their specific role in the process of knowledge: “For the (vigil) is the light of the intelligence/thinking (*לבינה*). By it, the mind (*לבו*) is elevated and the thought (*לבי*) concentrated, the intellect (*רום*) flies (on high) and gazes at spiritual things and becomes young and illuminated in prayer”¹²¹⁸. One can easily observe that, in Isaac’s vision, through clear “intelligence/ thinking” (*לבינה*), generated by the vigil and, generally, by the ascetic endeavour, the “thought” (*לבי*) becomes unified, “the mind/understanding” (*לבו*) rises up and the “intellect” (*רום*) shines, rejuvenates and stretches toward the spiritual things.

5.5 The worldly and the spiritual knowledge

The most recurring gnoseologic scheme in Isaac’s writings divides the process of knowledge into two types – referring to the material world and to the spiritual world, or the worldly knowledge and the spiritual knowledge. To put it differently, one speaks about rational and philosophical knowledge, respectively theological knowledge.

¹²⁰⁹ *לבינהו דלבי רומהו*.

¹²¹⁰ *לבו*.

¹²¹¹ II, 18, 18.

¹²¹² *לבוהו לבינהו*.

¹²¹³ *לבינהו לבי לבינה*.

¹²¹⁴ *לבינהו לבינהו*; see also KG IV.43; John the Solitary, L.G. Rignell, *Briefe von Johannes dem Einsiedler*, Lund, 1941, p. 69.

¹²¹⁵ *לבינהו לבינהו*; KG III.72; IV.72; , L.G. Rignell, *Briefe von Johannes*, p. 62; Theodore of Mopsuestia, A. Mingana, *Commentary of Theodore of Mopsuestia on Nicene Creed*, 1932, p. 130.

¹²¹⁶ *לבינהו לבי רומהו*.

¹²¹⁷ II, 40, 4-5.

¹²¹⁸ I, 80, p. 375 (B, 560).

The worldly knowledge reflects, according to the bishop of Niniveh, the cognitive method specific to science and especially to philosophy, for which knowledge is its very matter. He clearly differentiates between two types of perception of truth, the first one strictly related to human reason (what we might call discursive knowledge, deductive, or philosophical), followed by a second way of perceiving the truth, out of grace (inductive or intuitive knowledge, or the knowledge of saints). Both categories are capable of studying and perceiving the rationality of creation, but the spiritual things are opened only to the second type. In the first category he includes the worldly sciences and arts, while the second refers strictly to the perception of God. Below is a suggestive excerpt where Isaac, using Basil the Great's and Evagrius' insights, speaks about the two types of knowledge:

The blessed Bishop Basil¹²¹⁹ ... makes a distinction between this perception¹²²⁰ of creation¹²²¹ that saints receive – that is the ladder of the intellect of which blessed Evagrius spoke¹²²², and the being raised up above all ordinary vision – and the perception of the philosophers. There is, he says a converse which opens up the door so that we can peer down into knowledge of created beings¹²²³, and not up into spiritual mysteries¹²²⁴. He is calling the philosophers' (knowledge) downwards knowledge¹²²⁵, for, he says, even those who are subject to passion can know this kind (of knowledge); this perception¹²²⁶ that the saints receive through their intellect as a result of grace, he calls knowledge of the spiritual mysteries above^{1227 1228}.

It is evident that the latter type of knowledge is not a gnosis in any usual epistemological sense. It seems not to have any actual discursive content. Its *causa efficiens* refers to God's grace intervention, in the intellect. The first lies in the natural capacity of human nature that is his reason, while the second is a free gift from above. We remember that Isaac calls the first one natural (ܢܬܝܒܐ), and the latter one supernatural (ܠܠܐ ܡܥ ܢܬܝܒܐ).

A second important difference refers to the methodology these two types of knowledge presuppose. The first one is generated by a diligent study, a deep philosophical analysis or by a mental investigation¹²²⁹, while the second occurs by spiritual operation¹²³⁰ and is directly connected to God's revelation¹²³¹.

¹²¹⁹ Letter 2; Syriac translation Add. 17192 190r; for details see note 7/2 of Brock (II, 35, 7), p. 153.

¹²²⁰ Literal ܢܬܝܒܐ – knowledge.

¹²²¹ ܢܬܝܒܐ ܢܬܝܒܐ.

¹²²² KG 4.31, 43.

¹²²³ KG 1.32, 71; V.76,

¹²²⁴ ܢܬܝܒܐ ܢܬܝܒܐ.

¹²²⁵ ܢܬܝܒܐ ܢܬܝܒܐ.

¹²²⁶ ܢܬܝܒܐ ܢܬܝܒܐ.

¹²²⁷ ܢܬܝܒܐ ܢܬܝܒܐ ܢܬܝܒܐ; See KG IV.2, 66.

¹²²⁸ II, 35, 7-8.

¹²²⁹ II, 3.3, 99.

If the former is based on the self (we might call it “anthropological knowledge”), the second is based on the experience of humility (it is rather theandric). For him rational knowledge, relying on its own forces, remains mere knowledge, but the knowledge of grace is spiritual. The former is connected with pride and arrogance and, therefore, spiritually, it always brings a risk of falsehood that might prevent from a real and valid knowledge. Isaac makes a clear distinction between the knowledge of the proud and the knowledge of the humble. Ascetic humbleness is an obligatory condition for real knowledge:

*Coloro che rapinano la conoscenza sono rapiti (a loro volta) presso la superbia, e quanto più meditano, (tanto più) si ottenebrano. Coloro invece nei cui movimenti entra ed abita la conoscenza, si abbassano verso l'abisso dell'umiliazione e ricevono in se stessi, con luce, la persuasione che dà gioia (Colossians 2:2)*¹²³².

Humility is synonym in this case with practice. Knowledge without practice leads not to truth but to a resemblance of it, while an experience in the Spirit brings the guarantee of the perception of truth¹²³³. Here he emphasises the danger of studying dogmas, Scripture, Canonical law or exegesis in a passionate state that may lead to false understanding and may even harm the one who undertakes such an endeavour.

This is why Isaac, when hierarchizing the types of knowledge, begins from the work of virtues, comprised in Evagrius' practical stage. We remember that he lists four cognitive stages. Out of these, the first three correspond to Evagrius' first stage: the knowledge of work involving the body, the knowledge of work which is concentrated and unified, and the knowledge of hidden struggles against it; then comes the fourth one, pertaining to the gnostic stage, the knowledge of the luminous service which is in God and takes place on its own in God. This is described as “spiritual conduct” and “wonder”¹²³⁴.

We intuit here a succession of the scholastic knowledge and the spiritual knowledge. If the former simply presupposes an academic preparation, the second must involve the ascetic practice. One may identify here another division between the knowledge of the senses and the noetic knowledge in the line of Evagrius. In fact, Isaac often deals with the second type that begins with a material practice, continues with a noetic practice and ends in what he calls spiritual knowledge (theoria). In the first centuria we can identify this succession of stages and the corresponding works for each moment:

¹²³⁰ I, 19, p. 105 (B, 155); II, 3.2, 77.

¹²³¹ II, 3.2, 77.

¹²³² II, 3.1, 25.

¹²³³ II, 3.1, 26.

¹²³⁴ II, 10, 1.

Tutta la conoscenza dunque si divide in due parti, in una parte sensibile e in una parte intelligibile. La prima è chiamata practica, che è la virtù, e la seconda contemplazione. E la prima parte, ancora, si divide in due altre parti: in una practica materiale e (in una) immateriale. La materiale si compie tra le altre persone, l'immateriale è quella che uno compie in se stesso¹²³⁵.

Then he lists the material and immaterial works corresponding to these two stages of practice that seem to generate the cognitive specific levels. For the material activities, quoting Matthew 25: 35-36, as tangentially mentioned above, Isaac speaks about the service of the sick people, the hospitality of the pilgrims, the alms for the poor, the compassion for those in suffering. All these envisage the relation with the neighbor. The immaterial works that take place within the person refer to more subtle activities or virtues like chastity, fasting, reading, the liturgical service, silence, prayer. Both of them have as their very scope the purification of the soul of every material movement so that to come closer to contemplation¹²³⁶.

In the same line of the division above, Isaac speaks about a kind of knowledge which studies virtues and another knowledge that consists in thinking of God, while quoting Mark the hermit. We remember that he lists four stages: the perception of the physical works, the perception of the fine and unifying works, the perception of the hidden struggles against these and, finally, the perception of the limpid work in God¹²³⁷. Trying to include these four stages into the Evagrian hierarchy, one can argue that the first three belong to the practical stage, while the fourth to the gnostic stage. Referring to John the Solitary's scheme, the first knowledge corresponds to the physical stage, the second and the third knowledge pertain to the psychical stage, while the fourth type of knowledge to the spiritual stage.

We will finally evoke two scriptural fragments interpreted in a gnoseological key, in particular establishing a relationship between wordly knowledge and the spiritual knowledge in the life to come. In the line of the Syriac symbolic exegetic tradition, Isaac describes the eschatological epistemology as divine vision in the image of the wedding, evoked in the Gospel of Matthew, chapter 22. "The banquet" designates the sight of spiritual knowledge¹²³⁸; "the food of the feast" is the image of the divine mysteries¹²³⁹; "the garment of the banquet" represents the mantle of purity¹²⁴⁰; "the filthy clothes" are image for the lustful impulses¹²⁴¹;

¹²³⁵ II, 3.1,56; II, 3.1,29.

¹²³⁶ II, 3.1,58.

¹²³⁷ II, 10,1.

¹²³⁸ ܐܠܗܐ ܕܥܡܪܐ ܕܥܡܪܐ ܕܥܡܪܐ.

¹²³⁹ ܐܠܗܐ ܕܥܡܪܐ.

¹²⁴⁰ ܐܠܗܐ ܕܥܡܪܐ.

¹²⁴¹ ܐܠܗܐ ܕܥܡܪܐ.

“the outer darkness” the state without any delight of true knowledge¹²⁴² and communion with God. In the same line, Sheol or Tartarus means a state destined to those bare of the divine light, which are gripped with false visions, fantasies of truth, and walk outside any divine knowledge. Literally, Isaac claims that Sheol is darkness without God for those who, trusting in the power of their mind, wander in delusion, ignorance and oblivion of God. Finally, the place of the bequest indicates a pure heart¹²⁴³, where heavenly light is revealed and experienced. Spiritual Knowledge occurs only in a pure heart, “where the new heaven is stamped”¹²⁴⁴.

Similarly, he quotes two places from Paul’s epistles and interprets them in an epistemological key. Firstly, while interpreting Ephesians 2: 22, 24 – “Put off the old man and put on the new man, who after God is created in righteousness and holiness” –, he describes the “new man”, as he who achieved the divine knowledge. In connection with this idea, he quotes 1 Corinthians 15:50 – “Flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God, neither does corruption inherit incorruption”– and argues that incorruption refers to the knowledge of the other world, while corruption describes the corruptive affections of the body and soul, which have their origin in the fleshly mind. By purity he understands the exalted and the intelligible contemplation of the purified soul¹²⁴⁵.

5.6 The knowledge out of creation, out of Scripture and the spiritual knowledge

We have highlighted that Isaac is tributary to Evagrius’ ascetical and cognitive scheme. Therefore what he calls “natural knowledge” reflects the perception of truth out of nature and Scripture (referring both to Bible and the writings of the Church Fathers), followed by the “supernatural knowledge”, referring to the direct contact with divinity.

Creation is the first medium in which God reveals Himself. Isaac asserts that “the first book¹²⁴⁶ given by God to the rational beings is the nature of the created things. Written teachings¹²⁴⁷ were added only after the aberration”¹²⁴⁸. Scripture itself seems to help only

¹²⁴² כְּחֶסֶד וְחַסְדֵּי אֱלֹהִים.

¹²⁴³ לֵב טָהוֹר.

¹²⁴⁴ I, 77, p. 350-351 (B, 5222-523).

¹²⁴⁵ I, 77, p. 350 (B, 521).

¹²⁴⁶ סֵפֶר הַמַּעֲשִׂים.

¹²⁴⁷ סֵפֶר הַמִּשְׁנָה.

¹²⁴⁸ I, V, p. 42 (B, 61). It is the same line with St Ephraim the Syrian, called „the saint of ecology” (See Mark Mourachian, “Hymns Against Heresies: Comments on St. Ephraim the Syrian”, *Sophia* 37 (2007), 2, p. 30-31).

those who are not able to spiritually understand the mysteries of God out of creation¹²⁴⁹. Interesting and useful for our analysis is a fragment that Ibn as-Salt assigns to Isaac, where the latter describes the nature as a mediator of divine knowledge: “All those that exists were created to proclaim the glory of God and to sing his praise: creature endowed with reason was created to know God, and those without it to make him known”¹²⁵⁰. This stage refers to what Evagrius calls natural contemplation, and, in particular, second natural contemplation. It is not simply a science, but an essential¹²⁵¹ vision¹²⁵² of creation, in the intellect¹²⁵³ by natural impulses in the “exact insights”¹²⁵⁴. It seems Isaac goes a step forward using this expression, involved by Evagrius only referring to God’s perception.

In the second centuria, Isaac describes the object of revelation referring to creation and the specific power that participates to the achievement of the object: contemplation of God’s providence observed in the sensible events. It begins with the faith of the intellect (personal resource); the second is given by the contemplation of the providence regarding the beings. The instrument is represented by the faith in the Creator; the third contemplation is reflected in his creative activity. Love is the instrument that supports this action; the fourth contemplation refers to God’s wisdom in the beings. Here one identifies the darkness of His wisdom (Ephesians 3:10). Finally, the last moment reflects the apophatic stage – an incomprehensibility of his intelligence¹²⁵⁵.

There is a qualitative difference between the object and the truth itself when it comes to the knowledge out of nature. If the first is directly connected with the struggle against passions and the life of virtue, the second is generated by the divine direct intervention at the noetic level. In the Second collection Isaac states:

Knowledge of truth is (knowledge) that shines out into knowledge resulting from the raising up of the intellect above everything and from continual meditation on God and

¹²⁴⁹ Sabino Chialà observes that, when using this expression, Isaac is tributary to his master Evagrius. See Paul Géhin (ed.), *Evagre le Pontique. Scholies aux Proverbes*, Paris, Cerf, 1987, SC 340, p. 270; *Letter to Melany 2* cf. *Isaac Sirianul – asceză singuratică*, p. 169-170.

¹²⁵⁰ Ibn as-Salt, „Trei scrisori despre asceză și viața de obște”, Paul Sbath, *Traité religieux, philosophiques et moraux*, p. 70-78, 108-110.

¹²⁵¹ *Ousia*.

¹²⁵² ܡܠܝܬܐ ܕܡܝܬܐ.

¹²⁵³ II,3.1,4; In the next paragraph, Isaac lists the moments comprised by the Evagrian “physiki” and “theologiki”: after refraining from a passionate behavior, one passes to the perception of truth in the second beings; then it comes the third moment – the movement to the natural creaturalty; finally – to being moved by the eternal life, according to the evangelical contemplation. Evagrius speaks about four movements: the passage from evil to virtue; second from disobedience to second natural contemplation (sensible world); the third moment from the previous stage to the knowledge of the rational beings (contemplation of the intelligible, incorporeal world); and the passage towards Holy Trinity (KG 2.4).

¹²⁵⁴ ܡܠܝܬܐ ܕܡܝܬܐ.

¹²⁵⁵ II, 3.2,73.

*by hope alone the intellect is raised to reflection to God... it mingles us with our stirrings with God*¹²⁵⁶.

One can intuit above the very scope of the natural knowledge in creation – the stupor before God’s mysteries and, finally, the connection with the new world and the life after resurrection. The Theodorian heritage of the two catastases is present in developing this idea¹²⁵⁷. Contemplating God’s creation, providence and compassion, one “stood amazed and filled his intellect with the majesty of God, (amazed) at all these things he has done and is doing and he wonders in astonishment at his mercifulness, how, after all these things God has prepared for them, another world that has no end, whose glory is not even revealed to the angels”¹²⁵⁸.

Finally, one may include the structure of human nature in the natural knowledge. In line with Paul (Romans 2:14), this knowledge refers to discerning good from evil as a specific feature of nature. We will refer to a short paragraph where Isaac states this idea: “Natural knowledge¹²⁵⁹ distinguisheth good from evil and is also called natural distinction. God has implanted in rational nature to know good from evil naturally¹²⁶⁰, without instruction, and yet increases through instruction”. Then he advocates its universal, active and permanent character: “There is no one in whom (this knowledge) is not active... it is without ceasing”¹²⁶¹.

The second mediator of knowledge, a collective personage, pertaining to the stage of primary natural contemplation, is represented by the spiritual beings, the angels. Throughout the writings of Isaac, the spiritual beings are mentioned and their very function seems to be the mediation of divine revelation. Quoting Evagrius, Isaac asserts: “When the holy angels approach us filling us with spiritual sight, then all those (things which)... were in opposition to us vanish and there comes peace and unspeakable stupefaction”¹²⁶².

Isaac discusses the problem of the hierarchical order of the spiritual beings and the vertical transmission of knowledge, from the higher hosts to the lower ones and by the latter to humans through the mediation of Christ. In the First collection he deals at large with this issue:

¹²⁵⁶ II, 10, 17.

¹²⁵⁷ See Mary Hansbury, “ ‘Insight without sight’: Wonder as an aspect of revelation in the discourses of Isaac the Syrian”, *Journal of Canadian Society for Syriac Studies* 8 (2008), p. 67.

¹²⁵⁸ II, 10, 19.

¹²⁵⁹ ܡܕܢܐ ܕܡܕܢܐ.

¹²⁶⁰ ܡܕܢܐ.

¹²⁶¹ I, 44, p. 212-213 (B, 318).

¹²⁶² I, 72, p. 334 (B, 497).

We have them as teachers, as they have each other, namely those who are lower (are taught by) those who are more instructed and enlightened than themselves... up to the one who has a teacher the Holy Trinity. And even he (does not receive instruction) of his own, but he has as teacher Jesus the Mediator¹²⁶³ through whom he receives instruction and transmits it to those who are at the same level and lower. Then again, as we naturally do not all possess the force to be moved by divine contemplation, and we share in this deficiency with all heavenly beings it is only by grace, without exercise of computation on our part, that we are moved by something which naturally is foreign to the human and to the angelic mind... Without their mediation¹²⁶⁴ our mind does not possess strength like that of those high and exalted beings who receive all revelations and contemplation from the essence, without an intermediary. But even they receive these revelations through an image of the Essence, not from the Essence Itself. So that our mind also is in the same degree as the other classes, not able to receive revelations and contemplation on their own, without an intermediary, but only from Jesus who sways the sceptre of the Kingdom¹²⁶⁵.

In the 25th discourse of the First collection Isaac divides the spiritual beings into nine hosts and three triades. Their naming is directly connected with their level of divine instruction and the degree of communion with the Trinity:

Because they are full of exalted light of the whole immaterial knowledge¹²⁶⁶ and have been saturated with the essential contemplation¹²⁶⁷ of the threefold rays of the beauty that creates all beauties... because they are in communion with Jesus... they are in truth near to him with the mark of the primary acceptance of the knowledge of his divine illuminated. By the godhead they are filled with essential knowledge¹²⁶⁸ ... and with the primary insight¹²⁶⁹ into the godhead¹²⁷⁰.

There are still a few important places where Isaac speaks about the angels' mediation of the divine knowledge. In the Second collection, the second centuria, one may find some fragments where, while theologising on the place of angels and the way they partake the divine knowledge, he highlights the communion between them and the human in the

¹²⁶³ *ܡܫܝܚܐ.*

¹²⁶⁴ *ܡܫܝܚܐ.*

¹²⁶⁵ I, 27, p. 133-134 (B, 197-199).

¹²⁶⁶ *ܡܫܝܚܐ ܕܐܠܗܐ.*

¹²⁶⁷ *ܡܫܝܚܐ ܕܐܠܗܐ.*

¹²⁶⁸ *ܡܫܝܚܐ ܕܐܠܗܐ.*

¹²⁶⁹ *ܡܫܝܚܐ ܕܐܠܗܐ.*

¹²⁷⁰ I, 25, p. 127 (B, 187); Hilarion Alfeyev argues that Isaac, while making this hierarchy, is tributary to Dionysius the Areopagite (*The Spiritual World of Isaac of Niniveh*, Cistercian Studies, Kalamazoo, 2000, p. 227-228), but Emiliano Fiori, in one of his recent studies, shows that he is more in debt to Diodore of Tarsus ("Perhaps those which are entrusted with magistracy and authority are smaller in number than those which are compelled to obey their commandment, says the master of teachers Diodorus Rhetor", I, 25, p. 126) or Theodore of Mopsuestia (cf. Paul Bettio, "Révélation et visions dans l'œuvre d'Isaac de Ninive: le cadre d'école d'un enseignement spirituel", in A. Desreumax (ed.), *Les Mystiques syriaques*, Paris, 2011, p. 99-119, in particular 102-110). His final thesis supports the idea that, in fact, Isaac did not really make a lecture of the Dionysian writings, but the angels' hierarchy was a common tradition of his Church, present in more anthological sources which used to be read in his time (See footnote 371, cf. Emiliano Fiori, *Dionysius the Areopagite and Isaac: An Attempt at Reassessment*, p. 288-304).

revelation of the mind¹²⁷¹. Isaac identifies here a kinship between the revelation of the angels and the first level of spiritual knowledge¹²⁷². Successively, in the next centuria¹²⁷³, Isaac clearly points to a fundamental distinction between the revelation transmitted by the angels and that by the Holy Spirit, regarding the means. If the first category makes use of senses, usually in a vision or voice, as those of Jacob, Joshua, Isaiah, Daniel or Zechariah, the second arises apart from the senses, in the limpidity of mind¹²⁷⁴, in the perception of heart¹²⁷⁵, as a hidden revelation¹²⁷⁶ as that of Samuel, Elisha, or Peter. There is also a second fundamental difference between the two, regarding the content – the first category refers to God’s Economy, the contemplation regarding those created, the knowledge of virtue, while the second category refers to the revelation concerning the Holy divine Nature performed in the mind by the Spirit only. Isaac speaks here about the monadic knowledge¹²⁷⁷, without any qualitative change (there is no ascent and descent), and its performers, quoting Evagrius, are defined as “gods”¹²⁷⁸. The function of these two categories is qualitatively different too – the angelic revelations purify, while those of the Holy Spirit sanctify. The last category is without any images and is understood only in silence. At this level one can speak about a “spiritual man”¹²⁷⁹ and the “spiritual order or stage”¹²⁸⁰.

In the Third collection there is an important text regarding the angels’ role of mediation in the process of knowledge that goes a step further with reference to the rapport between the angels’ revelation and the revelation of the Holy Spirit. In the 9th discourse, the bishop of Niniveh asserts that all revelations come by means of angels until one arrives at the divine vision¹²⁸¹. All angelic revelations precede those of the Holy Spirit. Speaking about the Old Testament interventions regarding the divine Economy he ascribes them to the angelic

¹²⁷¹ II, 3.2, 69-76.

¹²⁷² II, 3.2, 75.

¹²⁷³ II, 3.3, 56-60.

¹²⁷⁴ ܠܠܗܐ ܕܠܗܐܝܬܐ.

¹²⁷⁵ ܠܠܗܐ ܕܠܗܐܝܬܐ.

¹²⁷⁶ ܠܠܗܐ ܕܠܗܐܝܬܐ.

¹²⁷⁷ ܠܠܗܐ ܕܠܗܐܝܬܐ. Isaac speaks here about a “monadic contemplation” or “monadic knowledge”. “Ihidaya” in Syriac is synonym with the Greek “monos” (from here “monachos”). “Ihidayuta” refers, in consequence to a monastic life, life in solitude. In Evagrius’ writing the term is rendered with “monás” to indicate a way of being, an eschatological union of the entire creation in Christ with the divinity. In conclusion the “monadic knowledge” refers to the eschatological knowledge of God, but here “the monad is not anymore the subject (the creation of God), but the object (God Himself) of the contemplation” (cf. Paolo Bettiolo in Isacco di Ninive, *Discorsi spirituali e altri opuscoli*, endnote 2, p. 117).

¹²⁷⁸ KG 4.51; 5.63.

¹²⁷⁹ ܠܠܗܐ ܕܠܗܐܝܬܐ.

¹²⁸⁰ ܠܠܗܐ ܕܠܗܐܝܬܐ ܕܠܗܐܝܬܐ.

¹²⁸¹ III, 9, 18-30.

visitations. Only after the Pentecost was the Holy Spirit fully at work¹²⁸², regarding the knowledge of the future world.

An important observation will help us place this stage into Evagrius' scheme (the primary natural contemplation) – when Isaac speaks about the “angelic contemplation”, in which the mind without the senses is moved by the spiritual powers, his phraseology intends to describe the presence of the angels when contemplating the divine realities. This is why this moment is already considered to be a divine science¹²⁸³.

Regarding the second source mentioned in the subtitle, the Scriptures¹²⁸⁴, there are many places where Isaac states precisely that the human can accede to certain knowledge of God by reading and meditating on the divine word contained therein. This occupation, essential to every Christian (against those who claimed they are spiritually advanced ascetics and see no use in reading the Scripture¹²⁸⁵) is a means of entry into the state of spiritually perceiving God. He asserts that, for a perfect knowledge and a limpid thinking, the books of the New Testament and those writings referring to the life of anchorites¹²⁸⁶ would suffice.

For the bishop of Nineveh there are places where the Scripture, from a literary point of view, does not fully reflect the truth, but through an external expression, it describes a reality that goes beyond appearances, beyond language. For example, regarding God's Economy in general, and Christ's incarnation, in particular, Isaac argues the inability of the external expression to fully reflect truth. For him, these expressions are metaphors that aim to guide the people towards the spiritual knowledge, superior to all other forms:

Come infatti i nomi e le metafore (e) anche le designazioni passionate di ira, furore e giudizio, (o) addirittura la corporeità delle connotazioni, riferiti a Dio a partire dall'economia (attuata) nella creazione, quando uno, per la potenza dell'operazione dello Spirito, si sia innalzato alla vera contemplazione, sono troppo difettosi e deboli in rapporto alla sua qualità, così i deboli versetti che il Libro riferisce alla causa della venuta del Cristo sono troppo difettosi e bassi in rapporto alla vera causa della sua economia nei confronti dei mondi. (Ne) testimoniano le nature spirituali, quelle... che sono state innalzate a quei gradi nella rivelazione del Cristo¹²⁸⁷.

¹²⁸² Mary Hansbury argues that this idea might be derived from Theodore of Mopsuestia who did not accept awareness of a separate hypostasis of the Holy Spirit in the Old Testament (cf. Robert Hill (transl.), *Theodore of Mopsuestia: Commentary on the Twelve Prophets*, Washington, The Catholic University of America Press, 2004, p. 117, 313-314). For details see Mary Hansbury, *Insights without sight*, p. 70.

¹²⁸³ Cf. Hilarion Alfeyev, *The Spiritual World of Isaac of Niniveh*, p. 227.

¹²⁸⁴ He uses a generic word to express both the Holy Scripture (Bible), as well as the Church Fathers (ܡܬܢܚܐܝܬܐ).

¹²⁸⁵ Messalians.

¹²⁸⁶ II, 3.4, 72.

¹²⁸⁷ II, 3.3, 85.

After emphasizing the incapacity of language to express the entire message and, finally, the truth that lies beyond the words, he boldly shows that a spiritual person is able to go deeper in the text and to perceive that which is not clearly expressed in the Scripture, during the revelation of the Spirit: “Lo Spirito gli manifesta le cose nascoste, su cui non hanno potere neppure i Libri santi. La mente pura può conoscere ciò che non è stato permesso di manifestare al Libro”¹²⁸⁸.

Here Isaac indicates a very concrete methodology of reading the Scripture – the “inner” or “spiritual reading”, expression used by Dadisho Qatraya, a contemporary author with Isaac. Isaac uses geographic expressions to picture this kind of lecture of the Scripture: “the impulses (of the mind to float) deep as the depth of the waters, so it can see all the treasures in its abysses”¹²⁸⁹. Or, in another place, he admonishes the readers to go deep in the inner sense of the Scripture and not to stumble upon the outer meaning: “anyone who is concerned with discovering the true meaning of the Scripture should not stumble in anything and reckon advantageous things to be harmful or understand anything solely on the basis of its simple outer form”¹²⁹⁰.

Dadisho Qatraya, a contemporary author with Isaac, following the Theodorian tradition, lists three types of interpreting Scripture: the historical reading¹²⁹¹ specific to the scholars, the homiletic reading¹²⁹², corresponding to the Fathers of the Church (Basil the Great and John Chrysostom), for the simple people, and the spiritual exegesis¹²⁹³ for hermits and saints¹²⁹⁴. The first two-types of Scripture exegesis do not exhaust the sense, but the third type, which requires spiritual experience, a pure heart and continual prayer, reflects a deeper sense. Such a reading and meditation on the word of Scripture is accompanied or caused by the intervention of the Holy Spirit, and therefore can introduce the reader in the divine mysteries. In the Second collection, 21th discourse, Isaac claims that the reading of the Scriptures is

*something very elevated...For it serves as the gate by which the intellect enters into the divine mysteries and takes strength for attaining luminosity in prayer: it bathes with enjoyment as it wander over the acts of God’s dispensation... from spiritual Scriptures or from things written by the great teachers of the Church of the topic of the divine dispensation or among those who teach the mysteries of ascetic life*¹²⁹⁵.

¹²⁸⁸ II, 3.3, 63.

¹²⁸⁹ I, 1, p. 3 (B, 5).

¹²⁹⁰ II, 10, 41.

¹²⁹¹ ܠܡܬܬܝܢܐ.

¹²⁹² ܠܡܬܬܝܢܐ ܝܬܝܐ.

¹²⁹³ ܠܡܬܬܝܢܐ ܠܡܬܬܝܢܐ.

¹²⁹⁴ *Commentaire du livre d’Abba Isaïe, logoi I-XV, par Dadišo Qatraya, CSCO 327/145, p. 119-120.*

¹²⁹⁵ II, 21, 13.

After underlining the importance of reading Scripture he identifies two important instruments that are obligatory for a proper reading of Scripture. In the line of ascetical tradition, he does not list the theological academic education as condition for an exegesis, but focuses on faith and prayer. Faith seems to be the theological instrument of correctly interpreting the text of Scripture: “The beginning of all our life in God... is to be healthy in your faith as you travel on the road on your ascetic way of life, so that from here you may suck the entire sweetness which the Spirit has placed in the Holy Scriptures”¹²⁹⁶. With regards to prayer, he establishes a deep connection with the Scripture reading, as being two complementary activities that characterise the life of a hermit: “Do not approach the mysterious words in the Scriptures without prayer and without asking help from God, saying: Lord, grant me to perceive the power that is in them. Deem prayer as the key to the insight of truth in Scripture”¹²⁹⁷.

As an excursus of this section, we will analyse Isaac’s perspective on the cognitive power of language or the epistemology of the words. The spoken word (voice), as well as the written word (Scripture), is a means of revelation and, consequently, part of the natural knowledge. Speaking about the use of the word in the cognitive process, Isaac develops a scale of three steps or three orders¹²⁹⁸ – referring to the communicated reality, expressing more than that reality, or describing less than the situation appears. But, when this principle is applied to God’s truth, one may find only one of these three orders – the word expressing less than the reality itself¹²⁹⁹. However, in a more flexible interpretation, Nestor Kavvadas argues that here Isaac reflects the three senses of the word – literal, the inner signification and the outer signification¹³⁰⁰.

In the same context, Isaac speaks about three categories or words – the word clothed in matter, but which does not take the seal of matter, being verbally communicated; the immaterial word which does take the form of matter; and thirdly, a simple word, which has no connection with matter. According to these three stages, there is also an itinerary from the material word, to the immaterial word, up to the simple word. The first category refers to the voice of the words, the second to the intellectual thoughts verbally communicated, and the

¹²⁹⁶ I, 1, p. 9.

¹²⁹⁷ I, 45, p. 220 (B, 329).

¹²⁹⁸ *ῥῆμα*.

¹²⁹⁹ II, 3.1, 3.

¹³⁰⁰ Cf. Nestor Kavvadas, *Isaak von Ninive und seine Kephalaia Gnostika. Die Pneumatologie und ihr Kontext*, p. 104.

third pertains exclusively to prayer¹³⁰¹. Any linguistic form remains a partial and inadequate way of expressing the divine truth and yet represents a medium of revelation.

On this scheme, Isaac divides the knowledge out of Scripture into two stages – starting from the outer meaning and continuing with the inner signification, achieved in the spiritual experience. These two stages pertain to two categories of people – the simple, who had certain knowledge of God’s economy, and those initiated in the truth, who have access to the depth of Scripture. For the first category he ascribes the “common knowledge”¹³⁰² out of Scripture, which is not opposed to the second, “mystic knowledge”¹³⁰³ out of the Scripture, but it is still qualitatively inferior. The former knowledge opens the way to the latter: “È introdotto dalla parola in quell’altra (conoscenza), più grande di questa, e gli si rivelano (cose) sempre diverse che non è possibile comunicare sulla carta e, con essa, anche la testimonianza del cuore”¹³⁰⁴.

One may find here the connection and the progress towards the next cognitive stage enounced at the beginning of this subchapter, the spiritual knowledge. In fact, even the Scripture has no other role than to introduce people in this third rank of knowledge. The words of Scripture remain feeble out of the Spirit’s intervention and complement in the spiritual knowledge. And the scholastic education cannot lead a person to the spiritual conduct, for “the practice cannot be learned by people through the art of words, education or teaching”¹³⁰⁵. This kind of knowledge is circumscribed to the sensible area, even refers to the intellections of the new world, as there is no participation of the Holy Spirit. To better express this practical dimension of the Scripture, he gives as example the epistles of Paul: “Il beato Paolo ha scritto molto sulle (realtà) spirituali, ma l’uomo non può percepire dalle sue lettere quell che egli ha gustato se non ha avuto parte allo Spirito”¹³⁰⁶.

We are now going to deal with the third level of knowledge of this paradigm, the spiritual knowledge, achieved through asceticism. Creation does not speak for itself if one has no spiritual eyes to read the signs of God in it, and the Scriptures, upon a superficial reading, cannot lead to partaking in the divine knowledge. The experiential knowledge is the one that confirms and complements the natural knowledge and that out of Scripture. According to Isaac, the truth is achieved exclusively out of experience. The following passage seems significant in this direction:

¹³⁰¹ II, 3.2, 2; II, 3.1, 98.

¹³⁰² *ἡ κοινὴ γνώσις*.

¹³⁰³ *ἡ μυστικὴ γνώσις*.

¹³⁰⁴ II, 3.4, 90.

¹³⁰⁵ II, 3.4, 16.

¹³⁰⁶ II, 3.4, 18.

Tutto il corso dei moti dell' intelletto nel movimento spirituale è rachiuto in tre conoscenze, che sono dette (essere) oltre la purezza: in una è instruito, nell'altra è reso perfetto, nella terza è incoronato. Due di queste (sono proprie) del corso naturale, una (è) oltre la naturale. La prima è chiamata conoscenza naturale seconda¹³⁰⁷; la successiva, conoscenza prima e naturale¹³⁰⁸; quella da qui è incoronato è (la conoscenza) della Trinità¹³⁰⁹ adorabile, il mistero essato dello Spirito¹³¹⁰.

There are few characteristics of the spiritual knowledge that make the difference regarding the two other previous stages. First of all, the content of spiritual knowledge is limitless and continues in the life to come. Its “end” is hidden in the divine essence¹³¹¹. The second important characteristic refers to the *topos* of this knowledge – the noetic part of the soul: “Verità è la limpidezza del pensiero¹³¹² di Dio che si leva nell' intelletto (ܠܡܥܡܐ)”¹³¹³. Isaac shows that truth at this level is perceived without any image and imagination. It lacks the presence of any matter as well as any composition of thoughts¹³¹⁴. One can identify here the reflection of the two types of knowledge – sensible and intelligible. The first one is indicative, while the second comes closer to the very knowledge of God¹³¹⁵. In fact, even the names of God as reveled in his Economy in the world to come will disappear¹³¹⁶, as well as the second natural contemplation¹³¹⁷. A kind of contradiction between the knowledge of this world and that in the life to come also occurs here, generated by the two ages in the line of Theodore of Mopsuestia, this world and the eschatological one, the first one being a school for the other. The first one is a progress in the knowledge of virtue, accompanied occasionally by spiritual insights that make the connection with the knowledge in the life to come.

The highest form of this knowledge that a mystic may achieve is the vision of the Holy Trinity¹³¹⁸, the end of all revelations¹³¹⁹, in which “all movement of the kingdom of heaven for the angels and humans, in the entire extension without end of that conduct”¹³²⁰ will occur. We remember that Isaac, by using a wrong translation of Evagrius, will say that even prayer

¹³⁰⁷ ܠܡܥܡܐ ܠܡܥܡܐ ܠܡܥܡܐ.

¹³⁰⁸ ܠܡܥܡܐ ܠܡܥܡܐ ܠܡܥܡܐ.

¹³⁰⁹ ܠܡܥܡܐ ܠܡܥܡܐ ܠܡܥܡܐ.

¹³¹⁰ ܡܕܝܢܐ ܠܡܥܡܐ ܡܕܝܢܐ ܠܡܥܡܐ; II, 3.3, 100.

¹³¹¹ II, 3.1, 2.

¹³¹² ܠܡܥܡܐ ܠܡܥܡܐ.

¹³¹³ II, 3.2, 35.

¹³¹⁴ Cf. KG 1.46.

¹³¹⁵ II, 3.4, 3. This idea is connected with the tradition of God's name. For details see Paolo Bettio, in Isacco di Ninive, *Discorsi spirituali e altri opuscoli*, endnote 1, p. 195.

¹³¹⁶ II, 3.3, 1.

¹³¹⁷ II, 3.3, 9.

¹³¹⁸ ܠܡܥܡܐ ܠܡܥܡܐ ܠܡܥܡܐ.

¹³¹⁹ II, 3.3, 48.

¹³²⁰ II, 3.3, 48.

Finally, the third order is similar with the life of the spiritual beings. Its work occurs at the noetic level and is generated by the Spirit. Here faith swallows knowledge and foretastes the reality of the future life. Isaac describes this transformation:

It is able to direct its flight towards non-bodily places and to the depths of the unscrutable ocean of wonderful and divine government which directs intelligible and apperceptible beings and to examine spiritual mysteries¹³³⁰ which are attained by the simple and by the subtle intellect¹³³¹. Then the inner senses awake to spiritual service, as the order of things which will be in the state of immortality and incorruptibility. For from here onwards they have received intelligible resurrection¹³³², symbolically, as a true sign of that universal renewal¹³³³.

One can easily identify in the fragment above the rapport between this world and the life to come as theologized by Theodore of Mopsuestia in the teaching of the two ages. At the intellectual level, spiritually, one experiences already the resurrection as part of the final unity when “Christ will be all in all” (1 Corinthians 15:28)¹³³⁴.

In synthesis, Isaac argues that the first stage of knowledge is generated by scholastic instruction; the second as a consequence of an ascetical behavior and a steady faith, while the third one pertains only to faith. All activities that are connected with the earthly things are circumscribed to knowledge, what is above, touching the heavenly realities, correspond to faith¹³³⁵.

Spiritual knowledge occurs at the noetic level and is generated by the direct implication of the Spirit. It transcends all natural knowledge and is engulfed by faith. In fact, this last order, more properly in Isaac’s language, is described as the state of faith¹³³⁶, superior to any kind of knowledge, which by definition, etymologically and conceptually, remains in the intellectual area and is defined in rational terms. Isaac argues: “When knowledge pursues the Essence it is called supernatural¹³³⁷ or rather agnostic¹³³⁸, because it is elevated above knowledge. As to this the soul does not acquire contemplation concerning it in materials lying without it... but by a sudden work of grace within, unexpectedly, is revealed in the soul. For ‘the kingdom of God is within us’ ”¹³³⁹.

¹³³⁰ כְּדִמְיוֹת רִיבִי.

¹³³¹ כִּי הֵם מְבַרְרִים וְעוֹשִׂים כְּדִמְיוֹת.

¹³³² מִמְּעַלְמֵנוּ וְעוֹלָם הַבָּא.

¹³³³ I, 51, p. 250-251 (B, 374).

¹³³⁴ See also II, 3.1, 68 (the mystery of resurrection and the new world: 1 Corinthians 15:28; Colossians 3:3-4).

¹³³⁵ I, 52, p. 253-254 (B, 378-379).

¹³³⁶ אֱמוּנָה.

¹³³⁷ לֵב הָאֱלֹהִים כְּדִמְיוֹת.

¹³³⁸ אֱמוּנָה.

¹³³⁹ I, 52, p. 253 (378).

For a clear perception of the problem one needs to understand what kind of faith Isaac refers to when speaking about the spiritual knowledge, given the fact that the term faith, in particular, is associated with a dogmatic creed, a doctrine, with a strict theoretical connotation. Isaac foresees this problem as risk and explains, leaving no doubt, that when talking about faith, without neglecting an objective dimension, he refers to a subjective dimension, mainly experiential, which fundamentally depends on the divine factor, next to the human one, and he defines it as participation in the divine mysteries by means of grace. The passage below renders the way in which the bishop of Nineveh suggestively defines the concept of faith:

I do not call this faith that a man believes in the discrimination of the adorable hypostases of the Essence or in the properties of His Nature or in the amazing government regarding humanity consisting in His accepting of our nature. But I call this faith: the intelligible light¹³⁴⁰ which by grace dawns in the soul and... supports the heart by the testimony of the mind, namely by the persuasion of hope which is far from all presumptions and not by tradition from hearsay. This light will show to the spiritual eyes¹³⁴¹ of the soul the hidden mysteries¹³⁴² which are in the soul and the secret reaches of divinity which are concealed from the eyes of fleshly men and are revealed spiritually to those who at the table of Christ are brought up in meditation upon his laws. As he says 'if ye keep my commandments, I shall send you the Spirit, the Comforter, whom the world cannot receive, and he will guide you into all truth' „¹³⁴³

This quoted fragment reveals explicitly that Isaac, when dealing with faith, recognizes a precise objective dimension – the confession of a Triune God and His hypostatic qualities, then the confession in the economy or divine providence in incarnation – and yet, he focuses on its subjective dimension, supernatural, experiential, which comes out of the divine revelation, by means of the noetic light, generated by the divine grace. The latter involves, on the one hand, the work of the heart (and occurs in the heart), and, on the other hand, requires the confirmation of the intellectual power. The participation of the two centres when describing the stage of faith once again confirms the synthesis between the intellectualist Evagrian line and the Macarian tradition. At the level of this encounter, faith takes the form of hope, not generated by confidence in one's own powers, thus avoiding any risk of arrogance, but by vision with the spiritual eyes of the mysteries revealed by the Spirit Himself, to those who know Christ from the observance of His commandments. This fragment may be a comprehensive summary of Isaac's gnoseologic vision.

¹³⁴⁰ ܠܝܠܬܐ ܕܠܝܠܐ.

¹³⁴¹ ܠܝܠܬܐ ܕܠܝܠܐ.

¹³⁴² ܠܝܠܬܐ ܕܠܝܠܐ.

¹³⁴³ I, 51, p. 252, (B, 376).

Given the subjective-experiential sense that he attributes to faith, on the line of logical consistency, knowledge and faith stand in an opposite rapport and, in consequence, as long as one speaks about knowledge, there is no faith, and when one reaches faith, knowledge is swallowed up. We refer here to a border between a type of knowledge which uses the tools of rationality and another form of perception of truth that does not involve the same cognitive power. Despite the fact that the latter one involves similar faculties, their functions remain spiritual. The bishop of Niniveh lists several reasons for which the two are in opposition. We will synthetize them under two headings.

Firstly, all knowledge implies doubts and a sceptical attitude; it calls for inquiries, investigations, examinations, and uses specific methodologies (systematic research) and means. There is nothing predetermined, the conclusion (the scientific truth) must take an interrogative form. These are the very principles that stand at the base of any scientific progress, which occurs under the auspices of such knowledge. Instead, faith involves a monadic/ unitary reflection¹³⁴⁴ that is undivided and single; it is accompanied by a limpid¹³⁴⁵ and simple¹³⁴⁶ mind, away from any logical constructions. Faith requires a childish mind¹³⁴⁷ and a simple heart¹³⁴⁸ (Matthew 18:3)¹³⁴⁹.

Secondly, knowledge is circumscribed to material, but faith is supernatural. Speaking about knowledge means being faithful to its own categories; the process knowledge occurs under the auspices of fear of not failing. There is only one way that knowledge always reiterates it: the fear followed by doubt; doubt brings investigation; and investigation seeks ways to achieve knowledge. Knowledge trusts its own possibilities, while faith always sits under the shield of divine Providence (Psalm 126:1). Faith has no limits, it participates to the hope that accompanies it and inaugurates another medium of existence. The one who seeks knowledge begins with a presupposition that he struggles to attain and fully respects the specific laws, but, on its way, faith, according to the Scriptures (Mark 9:23), thinks that everything is possible and nothing is impossible with God. The centre of gravity moves from the human forces to the divine power.

Isaac does not reject knowledge (interpreted here as philosophical or scientific), but evokes the risk that might appear on the way. He clearly manifests an opposition regarding

¹³⁴⁴ כחידוש אחד.

¹³⁴⁵ כחידוש.

¹³⁴⁶ כחידוש.

¹³⁴⁷ כחידוש כחידוש.

¹³⁴⁸ כחידוש.

¹³⁴⁹ I, 51, p. 243 (B, 362).

the knowledge that stands against faith (or spiritual knowledge). And, simultaneously, he identifies the distinction and the progressive stages within the process of knowledge that bring it close to the perception of the heavenly realities. He even praises the encounter between knowledge and faith, when the former one “is clad with fiery impulses so that it blazes spiritually and acquires the wings of apathy and is lifted up from the service of earthly things towards the place of its creation”¹³⁵⁰.

Eventually, Isaac makes a balance between the two concepts, and yet stresses the superiority of faith. Knowledge is a step towards faith and it is exceeded or, rather, it finds its fulfilment in faith:

Knowledge (עֵלֶּם) is made perfect by faith (אֱמוּנָה) so that it acquires the power to ascend and to perceive¹³⁵¹ that which is above all perceptibility and to behold¹³⁵² the splendour of Him that is not attained by the mind or the knowledge of the creatures. Knowledge is the ladder on which the man ascends to the heights of faith, but which does not use anymore when he has reached faith... Faith shows us as it was before our eyes the reality of that future perfection. By faith we are instructed above those unattainable things, not by investigation or by the power of knowledge¹³⁵³.

We note in this paragraph that everything that cannot be perceived out of created world or investigation of mind can be known by faith. The method of perceiving the truth according to faith does not occur only at the intellectual level, but also by “feeling” and “vision”. In a paradoxical expression, according to Isaac, one can feel what is above all feeling (the same radical - פֶּלֶא - used both for the verb and noun) and one can see God’s light with the intellect.

The stage of faith corresponding to the spiritual order is described as wonder¹³⁵⁴, simple vision¹³⁵⁵, and insights without sight¹³⁵⁶, referring to the divine nature. During lifetime this occurs partially, but in the eschatological time, one will reach the fullness of its reality¹³⁵⁷.

Despite all we have said up to his point with regards to knowledge and faith, Isaac uses the term “knowledge” occasionally when it comes to the spiritual stage, although it no longer gets the same connotations. This type of knowledge takes place beyond purity and it especially refers to the knowledge of the Holy Trinity. Isaac lists three categories of people – scholars (חֲכָמִים), perfect (קְדוֹשִׁים) and crowned (מְלֻכִּים) – according to three stages of

¹³⁵⁰ I, 51, p. 246 (B, 367).

¹³⁵¹ עֵלֶּם.

¹³⁵² עֵלֶּם.

¹³⁵³ I, 51, p. 246 (B, 367).

¹³⁵⁴ עֵלֶּם.

¹³⁵⁵ עֵלֶּם לֵב עֵלֶּם.

¹³⁵⁶ עֵלֶּם לֵב עֵלֶּם.

¹³⁵⁷ I, 51, p. 263 (B, 377).

knowledge – secondary natural knowledge¹³⁵⁸ primary natural knowledge¹³⁵⁹ and the knowledge of the “adorable Trinity”¹³⁶⁰, the exact mystery of the Spirit¹³⁶¹ – but in the strict sense only the last category of people and the last cognitive state correspond to what he calls spiritual knowledge¹³⁶².

5.8 Knowledge and un-knowledge

We will emphasize from the outset that, when speaking about un-knowledge/ ignorance (ܠܚܝܬܐ ܠܐ), Isaac refers to two different aspects. On the one hand, the state of un-knowledge points to ignorance regarding God due to a passionate life; on the other hand, he refers to the form of divine perception that goes beyond natural knowledge and its methods. The second dimension is a fundamental element for the topic under discussion. The representative authors using this language in Patristics are Gregory of Nyssa and Pseudo Dionysius¹³⁶³.

In the terminology of the East Syriac mystics the concept acquires a double meaning. Firstly, incognoscibility refers to God’s transcendence and his total incomprehensibility. This first dimension can be framed in a given objective, and, in theological terms, it is called apophatic knowledge. It refers more to what God is not, than to what he is. The mentor of this outlook remains, par excellence, Pseudo Dionysius¹³⁶⁴. Regarding Isaac, this perspective is present throughout his discourses. We will quote and analyse two important places where the bishop of Niniveh expresses this idea. In the First collection, the 26th discourse, he presents the principles of “apophatic theology” from an experiential angle:

What is parity and disparity? Disparity of contemplation (ܠܝܢܐܠܝܬܐ) – differences and variations in one soul – is the eternal thought¹³⁶⁵ of God being unattainable. Parity is truth being revealed¹³⁶⁶. If a nature able to err should receive in this world the exact truth, it would die by the power of its liability to err. This is “oh, depth of the riches” an “how unsearchable are His judgments” and “who has known the mind of God” and the like, which in an astonishing way and among sighs rise in the mind¹³⁶⁷ from time to time, which by some is called the cloud. From this, disparity of contemplation and

¹³⁵⁸ ܠܚܝܬܐ ܠܐ ܠܚܝܬܐ ܠܐ.

¹³⁵⁹ ܠܚܝܬܐ ܠܐ ܠܚܝܬܐ ܠܐ.

¹³⁶⁰ ܠܚܝܬܐ ܠܐ ܠܚܝܬܐ ܠܐ.

¹³⁶¹ ܠܚܝܬܐ ܠܐ ܠܚܝܬܐ ܠܐ.

¹³⁶² II, 3.3, 100.

¹³⁶³ See Robert Beulay, *La lumière sans forme*, p. 171.

¹³⁶⁴ Robert Beulay, *La lumière sans forme*, p. 162-169.

¹³⁶⁵ ܠܚܝܬܐ ܠܐ; 1 Corinthians 2:16.

¹³⁶⁶ ܠܚܝܬܐ ܠܐ ܠܚܝܬܐ ܠܐ.

¹³⁶⁷ ܠܚܝܬܐ ܠܐ.

*divergence of insight are born concerning the unattainable inquiry into God's judgments*¹³⁶⁸.

In this excerpt Isaac clearly argues, involving the concept of parity (uniformity) and disparity (un-uniformity), that the complete divine truth cannot be perceived by the human being, as it is beyond the natural powers with which he was endowed. To support his argument, the bishop of Nineveh, tributary to the Jewish reading of the Bible, asserts that nobody can understand “the thought of God”¹³⁶⁹ without being clashed under the burden of the revelation¹³⁷⁰. But, at the spiritual level, one may partake, partially¹³⁷¹, in one's ascetic mind, mysteriously, to the divine knowledge. And yet, the possibility of knowledge remains limited.

In the same collection, the 45th, in the frame of the two Theodorian catastases, Isaac clearly emphasizes the transcendence of God and the human's inability to accede to perfect knowledge in the earthly life. I will quote below a short fragment:

*However he will be raised up, his advance in knowledge will not be complete until the world of glory has come and he has received the whole of his treasure... in the world of truth, He will show him His face, not however the face of His essence*¹³⁷². *The more the righteous advance to the vision of Him, the more they see an enigmatic sight, as an image shown in the mirror. There, however, they will see the revelation of truth*¹³⁷³

Knowledge on earth is partial, and the eschatological one, although of superior quality, will never reach its end. Even though the names the Holy Scriptures give to the realities around God are partial and may help humans gain access to certain divine knowledge and yet within the natural right frame, there is still a clear difference between “our true knowledge and the truth of the knowledge”¹³⁷⁴. At the end of time, just as in the beginning, there will be a time when “there will be no name for God”¹³⁷⁵. God's truth is hidden “in him from the eyes of

¹³⁶⁸ I, 26, p. 131 (B, 193).

¹³⁶⁹ ܐܡܪܐ ܡܢ ܝܕܐ.

¹³⁷⁰ Exodus 33: 20; Deuteronomy 4:12.

¹³⁷¹ See the image of the cloud (ܥܠܡ/ σκότεινότητος). Isaac's symbolic method uses biblical images so as to describe the new type of knowledge inaugurated by Incarnation, perceived as a personal spiritual journey. In connection with the book of Exodus, he uses the image of “the cloud” (ܥܠܡ/ νεφέλη) – I, 69, p. 321-322 (B, 480) –, the “dark cloud” (ܥܠܡܐ) and the “darkness” (ܥܠܡܐ/ γνόφος and σκότος) – I, 2, p. 9 (B, 14); III, 7,7 – in order to describe the apophatic knowledge which takes place in the amazement and stupor before God, beyond prayer itself, during the spiritual state, which is the noetic perception of God's mysteries (II, 3. 1, 36).

¹³⁷² ܐܡܪܐ ܡܢ ܝܕܐ.

¹³⁷³ ܐܡܪܐ ܡܢ ܝܕܐ; I, 45, p. 217 (B, 324).

¹³⁷⁴ II, 3.4, 3; one can identify here the sensible dimension of the names and the intelligible sense, in the line of the exegetic tradition. The first meaning refers to God's works regarding the created things, while the second dimension points to the things of the future world, “the truth of the knowledge”.

¹³⁷⁵ II, 3.3,1.

all what is created... but never (will be revealed) what is referred to his essence”¹³⁷⁶. All that can be thought and expressed about God refers to “those who are under him”¹³⁷⁷.

The second dimension of the concept refers to the elevation of the mind above all forms of worldly knowledge. This time, the construction of this perspective is tributary to Evagrius, whom he quotes numerous times. The classic place where he apophthegmatically proclaims his vision regarding the concept of un-knowledge while describing the gnostic stage is even quoted by Isaac: “Blessed is he who has reached during prayer unconsciousness”¹³⁷⁸ which is not to be surpassed”¹³⁷⁹. The quoted text shows that Isaac integrates this way of perception outside the frame of natural gnoseology. At this stage the ascetic “gazes in ecstasy”¹³⁸⁰ at the unattainable things which do not belong to the world of mortals... this is the ignorance/ un-knowledge (אֵי-חָכְמָה)¹³⁸¹”

That Isaac, when speaking about un-knowledge, refers to a stage beyond the nature of knowledge can be observed in the 52th discourse of the First collection, where the unique process of knowledge is ranked into three ascetic states. We recall the three stages:

- knowledge of things when instruction is acquired through senses – natural knowledge (חָכְמָה);
- spiritual (רוּחָנִי) knowledge¹³⁸², beyond the visible things, generated by the intelligible things in non-bodily natures; both take their information from without;
- knowledge beyond knowledge, excellent knowledge (אֵלֹהִי חָכְמָה), supernatural (אֵלֹהִי חָכְמָה) or agnostic (אֵי-חָכְמָה) because is elevated beyond knowledge¹³⁸³.

This mode of knowledge changes the perception of the divine. Nothing comes from without, but the grace of God generates the contemplation of the divine. There are three observations to be made regarding this hierarchy. Firstly, the essential difference between the third mode and the first two is the source of the knowledge – if natural knowledge is

¹³⁷⁶ The knowledge regarding the essential nature (II, 3.1.2)

¹³⁷⁷ II, 3.2,3; One can identify here in a primary form the theological concept identity-differentiation or the difference between God’s essence and his energies.

¹³⁷⁸ אֵי-חָכְמָה – literally un-knowledge.

¹³⁷⁹ KG III.88; I, 22, p. 118 (B, 175).

¹³⁸⁰ אֵלֹהִי חָכְמָה.

¹³⁸¹ Gr. ἄγνοια; I, 22, p. 118 (B, 175).

¹³⁸² Generally “spiritual knowledge” is used in reference to the third stage. Yet, here Isaac uses it referring to the primary natural contemplation. This fragment is a good example that highlights the flexibility of Isaac’s terminology.

¹³⁸³ I, 52, p. 253 (B, 378).

generated by continual meditation and diligence in education and the second occurs as a result of a virtuous life and noetic cleansing, the third mode is achieved in the grace of God, without any ascetic work, spontaneously and directly directed by God's will. The second observation relates to the type of received information— the first two stages pertain to material information and through the senses, but the supernatural knowledge points to the immaterial revelation coming from without, at the noetic level. And a third survey is related to the freedom of the ascetic – the first two stages, in a certain sense, are caused by the will and the ascetic effort of human, but the third one depends only on the divine will and is actualised at the level of faith.

The 82th discourse seems to be much clearer when defining the concept of un-knowledge in reference to the spiritual conduct: “And though he has penetrated into the mysteries of all spiritual kinds (of beings) and possesses great wisdom concerning all the creatures, he knows with perfect certainty that he knows nothing”¹³⁸⁴. This is the realm of divine vision, as we will see in the next chapter – knowledge described as *theoria*, spiritual prayer and wonder/ stupor.

5.9 Knowledge and vision

From the texts above one can argue that, for Isaac, there is a terminological flexibility when speaking about the highest spiritual stage, described with “un-knowledge”, as I have highlighted above, divine vision or *theoria*, spiritual prayer and wonder/ stupor¹³⁸⁵. In the Evagrian language the gnostic is synonymous with “the seer”¹³⁸⁶. The concept of vision remains at the very core of the argument especially regarding the East Syriac theology of the time and here we refer to the personalities evoked in the chapter dedicated to the Christology of Isaac's time.

In the following pages we are going to deal with the theological problem of the vision of God, offering first a retrospective of some important moments and authors from the history of Christian Spirituality regarding this issue¹³⁸⁷, as it was not occasional, and, in particular, we will highlight some important cases of East Syriac mystics.

¹³⁸⁴ ܐܝܬܐ ܕܝܫܘܥ ܕܡܪܝܢܐ, I, 82, p. 387 (B, 579); one can argue Isaac uses the same concept to express the negative state of religious ignorance, that is the lack of any spiritual preoccupation: I, 6, p. 56 (B, 87); I, 76, p. 350 (B, 522).

¹³⁸⁵ Robert Beulay observes that one cannot find a terminological uniformity when describing the unitive stage at different East Syriac authors: “un-knowledge” at Simon Taibuteh, “spiritual vision” and “essential faith” at Dadisho Qatraya, the “contemplation of the Holy Trinity and Christ in his glory” at Joseph Hazzaya and “primary spiritual contemplation” at Isaac of Niniveh (Cf. Robert Beulay, *L'enseignement spirituel de Jean de Dalyatha*, p. 386).

¹³⁸⁶ Cf. Vladimir Lossky, *The vision of God*, Wisconsin, Faith Press, 1963, p. 87.

¹³⁸⁷ This problematic was not occasional if one refers to at least four important moments from the history of the Church: the anthropomorphic dispute in the fourth century (Egypt, Syria, North Africa); the case of Symeon the

5.9.1 The concept of vision in the East Syriac Mystics

We remember that the problem of the vision of Christ was the very core of the council convoked by Catholikos Timothy I in 787. I will quote an excerpt of the text that gives us a panorama of the event: “Il y eut, du temps de Haroun ar-Rashid... un certain nombre de chrétiens qui croyaient et affichaient publiquement que l’homme assumé de Marie voit le Seigneur éternel... Fut excommunié et maudit quiconque croyait que Jésus, qui est l’homme assumé de Marie, a vu le Seigneur qui est le verbe éternel, dans le monde, ou le verra dans l’autre monde d’une vision oculaire ou d’une vision intellectuelle, on s’appuya pour cela sur la tradition et la doctrine de crainte que quelque créature ne vienne partager avec le Créateur... quelques-uns de ses attributs essentiels, dont la vision du Seigneur”¹³⁸⁸. According to the text, Catholikos Timothy anathematizes those who assert that the human nature of Christ can see His divinity and those who say that the divine nature can be seen by some created being. Stating that Christ’s humanity is not able to see his divinity (Jesus cannot see Christ) means asserting the impossibility for any human being to see God. This thesis came against the mystics’ assertion to see God, a constant of monastic theology.

We turn now to the retrospective we have announced above. We will commence with a very important representative of the Antiochene School, John Chrysostom. Despite the fact he does not accept any vision of God’s essence, yet he asserts that God is knowable by the effects or His works in the created world. But, finally, this occurs especially in Christ’s glorified humanity. Christ is the icon of God the Father and the means of communicating himself to creation according to his natural capacity¹³⁸⁹. Another important representative for the same theological school and, in particular for Isaac, is Theodore of Mopsuestia. One remembers his theory of the two contrary states (one characterised by corruptibility, mutability, possibility and mortality and the other by incorruptibility, immutability, impassibility and immortality). He does not really speak about the concept of vision, but more about the ways of revelation of the nature of God under a form adapted and close to human’s

New Theologian at Constantinople in the 10-11th century and the humanist clerical branch of the Byzantine Church of his time; the Palamite dispute (a rational theology and an experiential hesychast orientation) in the 14th century; or the spiritual renewal movements during the time of Nicodemos of Mount Athos in the 18th century (For details see Alexander Golitzin, *Mistagogia – experiența lui Dumnezeu în Ortodoxie: studii de teologie mistică*, Sibiu, Deisis, 1998, p. 184-237).

¹³⁸⁸ Élie bar Šennaya, *Kitab-al-Majalis*, cf. Khalil Samir, “Entretien d’Élie de Nisibe avec le vizir Ibn’ Alī sur l’unité et la trinité”, *Islamochristiana* 5, 1979, p. 31-117 (here p. 90, n. 17) ; quoted by Vittorio Berti, *Les débats sur la vision*, p. 152.

¹³⁸⁹ *Sur l’incompréhensibilité de Dieu*, “Sources Chrétiennes”, 28, 1951, p. 232.

capacity, in the corporal Man Jesus. It is by this means by which divinity acts. The possibility of divine vision only reflects in seeing it in his image, which is the humanity of Christ¹³⁹⁰.

Evagrius, a very important name for the theology of Isaac, equalises the concept of “gnostic man” to “the seer”¹³⁹¹. During pure prayer, the light of the Trinity shines in the spirit of the purified man¹³⁹² and the *nous* becomes the place of God, the image of God in the temple. In the process of seeing God, the mind understands itself as the place of God and a receptacle of the Trinitarian light. It is bare mind “consummated in the vision of itself, having merited communion in the contemplation of the Holy Trinity”¹³⁹³. It sees itself as the sapphire of the sky¹³⁹⁴. Evagrius argues that there is no change in the vision of the Trinity, called essential knowledge¹³⁹⁵. God is perceived immediately without the intermediation of any image. The very important detail in this frame would be if Evagrius’ doctrine of vision refers to God’s essence. Vladimir Lossky argues that it is quite difficult to make categorical pronouncements, as Evagrius speaks always about the vision of the light of the Trinity and yet he does not make any distinction between God’s nature and the essential light. Anyhow he rejects all visible theophanies, while identifying allusions in Evagrius’ writings to the Messalianism¹³⁹⁶.

In reference to the Messalian movements, we will evoke the case of Pseudo Macarius and his “Spiritual Homilies”. He points to a clear distinction between the philosophical knowledge out of reasoning and the divine knowledge of the faithful. Contrary to Evagrius’ intellectualistic system, Macarius’ mystic vision has an affective character; it is addressed to the senses. Here knowledge means consciousness. As the Word clothed in humanity, so human must be clothed in the Spirit. The experience of divine is described as food, drink, sweetness. He establishes a hierarchy and a spiritual evolution from the category of people who feel to the one who experience illumination¹³⁹⁷ by the means of visions. These two stages reach their peak in the revelation¹³⁹⁸ of the divine mysteries in the soul¹³⁹⁹. There is a common

¹³⁹⁰ *Les homélies catéchétiques de Theodore de Mopsueste*, R. Tonneau et R. Devreesse (ed.), *Studi e Testi*, 145, Vatican, 1949, p. 185.

¹³⁹¹ Cent. VII, 26, W. Frankenberg, *Evagrius Ponticus*, Berlin 1912, p. 481.

¹³⁹² Διάνοια... καιρῷ προσευχῆς τὸ τῆς ἁγίας τριάδος φῶς βλέπουσα (*Anti-rhetoric*, p. 475).

¹³⁹³ Cent. III, 6, Frankenberg, *Evagrius Ponticus*, Berlin 1912, p. 193.

¹³⁹⁴ One finds the same idea in Isaac I, 22, where he deals with spiritual prayer and Moses’ vision.

¹³⁹⁵ Γνώσις οὐσιώσης.

¹³⁹⁶ Vladimir Lossky, *The vision of God*, p. 91-92; Regarding the Syriac KG, despite the fact that Evagrius states that God is incomprehensible in Himself and his nature is unknowable, he argues also that the spiritual intellect is the visionary of the Holy Trinity and that a real theologian is the one who sees God (Evagre le Pontique, *Les six siècles des Kephalai Gnostica d’Evagre le Pontique*, 5.51-52, 57, 63; 3.30 ; 5.26).

¹³⁹⁷ φωτισμός.

¹³⁹⁸ ἀποκάλυψις.

¹³⁹⁹ *Homily 7, 5-6* (Pseudo Macario, *Spirito e fuoco. Omelie spirituali*, rd. By L. Cremaschi, vol. 2, Bose, 1995).

element here – Macarius speaks as well about the essential light¹⁴⁰⁰ of the divinity in the soul – and yet he describes a completely different concept. If, for Evagrius, there is a stable vision of the essential light, Macarius speaks about the fire of grace kindled by the Spirit in the heart, this time, not the mind as in Evagrius' case, that follows the fluctuations of the will. Regarding the object of vision, the Macarian language is not dogmatically precise. In the Homily 34, one reads that in the life after death “all we are transformed into the divine nature”, passage followed by the mention of light “all repose in a single light”¹⁴⁰¹.

Vladimir Lossky evokes another Byzantine author that seems to occupy the middle position between the previous two in the problematic of divine vision, Diadochus of Photice. His spiritual doctrine points to the invisible God and his energies¹⁴⁰² and the union with God in love at the level of the inward sense – heart, spirit and soul. Diadochus, while using a language of perception, is tributary to Macarius. And yet, he opposes the sensual mysticism of the Messalians by arguing that the glory of God does not appear visibly¹⁴⁰³. Throughout history, God has been seen visibly, the Formless one in the form of glory, in the form of his will. Finally, the byzantine author distinguishes between gnosis and theology. The former one refers to the process of teaching, while the latter one evokes an experience of union with God, a partaking of the essential light, through intellectual recollection at the level of the heart¹⁴⁰⁴. One can identify here a middle way between the intellectual mysticism and the mysticism of the heart, engaging human integrally¹⁴⁰⁵.

We will go a step further with this theme into the Syriac milieu. The first important author in dealing with divine vision is Ephraim the Syrian. Using an apophatic language to

¹⁴⁰⁰ ὑποστατικός φωτός – hypostatic (real) light.

¹⁴⁰¹ Homily 34, I.

¹⁴⁰² Δυνάμεις or ἐνέργειαι.

¹⁴⁰³ Diadochus of Photice, *Spiritual Works*, SC 5, 1966, Cent. 36, p. 105.

¹⁴⁰⁴ Cent. 59, p. 119.

¹⁴⁰⁵ This personage is very interesting in the Palamite dispute of the fourth century next to Evagrius and Isaac of Niniveh. Antonio Rigo demonstrates that Gregory Palamas, when speaking about the illuminative condition, quotes Evagrius (“La condition de l’intellect est une hauteur intelligible semblable à la couleur du ciel dans laquelle pendent le temps de la prière vient la lumière de la Sainte Trinité”, *Reflection* 4 and 2), Diadochus of Photice (“Quand l’intellect a commencé à goûter, dans un sentiment profond la bonté du Saint Esprit, alors nous devons savoir que la grâce commence à peindre la ressemblance par-dessous l’image... la perfection de celle-ci nous ne la connaîtront que par l’illumination”, Cent. 89) and Isaac of Niniveh (“During prayer the mind puts off the old man and puts on the new man by grace, then it also sees its steadfastness resembling the sapphire or the colour of heaven, as the place of God was called by the elders of Israel to whom it appeared in the mountain... Prayer is steadfastness of mind which is terminated only by the light of the Holy Trinity through ecstasy”, *Discourse* 22/ Syriac; 32/ Greek). What is interesting to observe refers to the fact that Palamas, while replying to his opponents in matter of the concept of the vision of divine light and the possibility of contemplation, he quotes all these three authors in different places. This might take us to the conclusion there is a kinship between them in matter of expressing the spiritual conduct, in particular the divine vision (For details see Antonio Rigo, “De l’apologie à l’évocation de l’expérience mystique. Évagre le pontique, Isaac le Syrien et Diadoque de Photice dans les œuvres de Grégoire Palamas et dans la controverse palamite”, *Knotenpunkt Byzanz. Wissensformen und kulturelle Wechselbeziehungen*, De Gruyter, 2012, p. 85-108).

interpret Moses' life, he argues that, while having the vision of God's glory, he had the consciousness that seeing means not seeing and knowing means not knowing. The human being cannot see God's essence, but his glory, because of God's condescendence by which he proportioned the vision of his glory to the human capacity of pertaining¹⁴⁰⁶; another important author is Narsai. For him, the human is not able to see God Himself whose glory is too high, as divinity cannot be seen by his creation. Christ, resplendent of glory, will make the human being able to see without seeing the hidden Being. The latter one remains the "Holy of holies", inaccessible and transcendent, while the former is associated with the "holy", that is Christ's body, visible for the rational creation. Christ's humanity, principle of divine essence among us, will be like an image for the exterior senses of the invisible divinity and, at the noetic level, it will provide certain knowledge of essence that remains invisible¹⁴⁰⁷.

I will add another important example, Babai the Great, the radical East Syriac conservatory theologian, already mentioned above. He speaks about a gradual knowledge of God. By means of symbols and images, God reveals his justice and providence in the saints and more in Christ, where the plenitude of divinity dwells. Then, borrowing the Evagrian language, he speaks about the perception of God in creation, the knowledge of the intelligible beings, by the elevation of soul above the earthly reality, so the contemplation of the corporeal and incorporeal intelligible beings and, finally, the knowledge of the Son, who surpasses all other knowledge by the unique knowledge of the Trinity, that is not really a vision. It is about the glory and the light of the face of Christ, mirror and image of the divine essence, perceived in the intellections of corporeal and incorporeal creatures¹⁴⁰⁸ and in the Scriptures. Finally he uses an apophatic language in the line of Dionysius when he speaks about un-knowledge and union in the cloud with One who is unknowable. In fact, there is no

¹⁴⁰⁶ Cf. E. Beck, "Ephrem", *DS*, XXVII, col. 792-793.

¹⁴⁰⁷ For details see Philippe Gignoux, "Les doctrines eschatologiques de Narsai", *Oriens Syrien*, 12 (1967), p. 23-54.

¹⁴⁰⁸ Commenting on the Evagrian sentence V. 57 (KG), Babai asserts: "Je comprends que, comme nous sommes limités en ce que concerne la contemplation dans ce monde, il considère que nous sommes totalement (incapable) de contempler les incorporels; c'est pour cela qu'il dit 'regarderons' parce que maintenant, même si quelqu'un est parfait dans sa connaissance et lumineux dans sa vision (ܐܠܗܐ) selon le bienheureux Paul, celui-là voit, pour sa consolation, peu du beaucoup et comme dans un miroir, tandis que la plénitude de la connaissance sera reçue par tous les rationnels dans le monde nouveau, par certains pour leur jouissance, par d'autres pour leurs tourments" (Babai the Great, *Commentary on Evagrius' Kephalaia Gnostica*, in W. Frankenberg, *Evagrius Ponticus*, Berlin, 1912, p. 342-243). One can observe here that for Babai there is a partial vision of God in the world, but the perfect knowledge (ܐܠܗܐ ܕܝܠܕܐ) is going to be achieved in the eschatological reality. Anyhow it is not about the vision of the divine nature, but the mystiques of light, that is the divine light present in creation.

knowledge, but a look without the desire of knowing, a loving conscience of the absolute transcendence of God, constituting for human the supreme and beatific delectation¹⁴⁰⁹.

Joseph Hazzaya is a name of reference regarding the concept of vision. The concept of mirror is present also in his works applied to Christ's humanity vis-à-vis the revelation of the Verb (the Son). I will quote a significant paragraph in this sense: "Pour tous les êtres rationnels, visibles et invisibles, l'humanité de Notre Seigneur sera un miroir dans lequel ils verront Dieu le Verbe qui habite en eux"¹⁴¹⁰. Regarding the ambivalence nature – glory in his mystical system, one can argue he does not indicate a sharp distinction between them as he arrives at speaking about nature, glory and royalty of Christ indiscriminately¹⁴¹¹. However, he makes an interesting hierarchy of light in the line of his tripartite spiritual life and he places the colour of the sky (zephyr) to the limit of somatic stage, then the colour of crystal to the psychic stage and the entrance into the spiritual stage where one achieves the vision of the formless light of the Trinity¹⁴¹².

John Dalyatha seems to be very courageous in expressing the possibility of Christ's humanity to see his divinity¹⁴¹³. In his perspective, Christ is the icon and the knowledge of the Father not only in his divinity, but in his humanity as well. Therefore, Christ's humanity has access to his divinity and, in consequence, humans too have access to God's divinity¹⁴¹⁴. There are mainly three theses on which he builds his perspective. Firstly, he uses a concept common for eastern Mystics – the mirror and the "vision in the mirror" of the soul that means the faithful reflection of the Prototype, safeguarding its transcendence. For a perfect vision, one needs to achieve limpidity. This phraseology reflects an apophatic theology. Secondly, in the same line the divine vision occurs in what he calls "obscure light" and this takes us further to the difference between the nature and the divine glory. Robert Beulay, in his monograph dedicated to John Dalyatha, underlines that, eight times in his work, he points to the difference between the nature and the glory of God¹⁴¹⁵. So as to support this idea, he frequently borrows the image of the fire,

¹⁴⁰⁹ Cf. Robert Beulay, *Jean de Dalyatha*, p. 434-437.

¹⁴¹⁰ *Cent. 6,8*, cf. Robert Beulay, *L'enseignement spirituel de Jean de Dalyatha*, p. 457.

¹⁴¹¹ Robert Beulay, *L'enseignement spirituel de Jean de Dalyatha*, p. 449. But, his biographer, Nestorius of Nuhadra, when speaking about the spiritual vision, clearly underlines that it is not about seeing the nature, but the divine glory. I will quote two short examples to support that: "rallegria il cuore dei giusti con una visione spirituale (ܐܘܪܝܬܐ ܕܥܠܡܐ) di cui per la loro volontà si sono privati... A questi saggi che dicono con furore, non sapendo: 'Come si vede (ܐܘܪܝܬܐ) la natura divina (ܐܘܪܝܬܐ ܕܥܠܡܐ)?', risponderò: 'O incredulo, non dico che è vista la natura, ma la gloria della sua grandezza (ܐܘܪܝܬܐ) ... luce (ܐܘܪܝܬܐ) della Santa Trinità'" ("Sull'inizio del movimento della grazia divina" §7, 9, cf. Vittorio Berti, *Grazia, visione e natura in Nestorio di Nuhadra*, p. 237-238 (241-242).

¹⁴¹² Cf. Vittorio Berti, *Grazia, visione e natura divina*, p. 253-254.

¹⁴¹³ His position places him outside the theological principles of his own Church (Cf. Robert Beulay, *L'enseignement spirituel de Jean de Dalyatha*, p. 440).

¹⁴¹⁴ Homily 25, in *L'enseignement spirituel de Jean de Dalyatha*, p. 511-514.

¹⁴¹⁵ *L'enseignement spirituel de Jean de Dalyatha*, p. 447.

commonly ascribed to the Alexandrine authors. And he states that as the operation of the fire is hidden, so the nature of God, while the action of the fire is visible, so is the glory of God¹⁴¹⁶. Therefore, the divinity operates and makes itself visible by its glory. He also employs the image of the sun and its rays to express the same distinction¹⁴¹⁷. And thirdly, the divine vision occurs by the means of Christ's glorified humanity present in the heart. Christ is the garment of the Father and the medium of His revelation in the world. To support this idea he uses the image of the fire that needs a matter to visibly manifest itself. Similarly, the noetic eye cannot see the divine nature without the temple of humanity in Christ¹⁴¹⁸, transfigured on the Tabor Mountain and glorified at resurrection. It is about the spiritualised body of Christ penetrated by the formless light, liberated from any material limitation and composition, able to dwell in a human's heart.

Finally, before going to Isaac's himself vision, we will focus at short on Timothy I's perspective on the topic under discussion. We have dwelt at large on the historical and theological context of his time in the previous chapters, therefore now we will only evoke his theological position regarding the possibility of seeing God. The very theme of the council was to condemn those representatives who supported the theological idea of the possibility that the Man assumed from Mary "sees" the eternal Lord. The gathering excommunicated all who believe that it was possible for Man to have an ocular or intellectual vision of the eternal Verb, in this world or in the world to come¹⁴¹⁹. And yet, one can observe that he accepts a kind of speculative and intellectual vision of God's glory, by the means of an experiential reading of Scripture, in order to achieve the knowledge of Christ's royalty. The soul knows and sees only in relation to the body, it is functional only within this paradigm. Resurrection does not cancel the composite character of humanity, interpreted at general or particular level and the distinction between Creator and creation is going to be manifest in the eschatological time as well.

Despite that, there are evident biblical eschatological texts that the patriarch could not ignore. One of them refers to Christ's transfiguration on Tabor Mountain. In a letter to the priests of Basra he writes:

Si tu veux, monte avec lui [Christ] sur le mont Tabor, et joins-toi aux fils du mystère du Royaume des Cieux. Sois Pierre, Jacques et Jean. Regarde-le ! Il est transfiguré, et son visage est devenu comme le soleil, et ses vêtements sont blancs et brillent comme jamais les hommes sur la terre ne peuvent blanchir. Est-ce que tu vois là une image du

¹⁴¹⁶ "De même que le feu manifeste aux yeux son opération, de même Dieu montre sa gloire aux êtres rationnels qui sont purs » (*Cent.* 1.17, H. 31b, transl. Robert Beulay, *L'enseignement spirituel de Jean de Dalyatha*, p. 448).

¹⁴¹⁷ *Cent.* 1.27, H. 32a.

¹⁴¹⁸ *Cent.* 1.27, H. 31a.

¹⁴¹⁹ Élie bar Šennaya, *Kitab-al-Majalis*, cf. Khalil Samir, "Entretien d'Élie de Nisibe avec le vizir Ibn' Alī sur l'unité et la trinité", *Islamochristiana* 5, 1979, p. 31-117 (here p. 90, n. 17)

*serviteur et du seigneur, ou plutôt la gloire une de la seigneurie et de la filiation, comme la lumière une dans le soleil et dans sa sphère?*¹⁴²⁰

Vittorio Berti shows that Patriarch Timothy uses the event of Tabor to express the possibility of knowing the royalty of Christ by means of the vision of the divine glory. He further argues that, circumscribed to a scholastic theology, Timothy develops the idea of an intellectual and speculative vision out of Scripture. The Tabor moment ensures the possibility for human to partake to the divine glory by means of Christ's body. Nonetheless, this glory is created, as pertaining to the body of Jesus, and remains composite. Therefore his concept of vision refers to the deified humanity in Christ¹⁴²¹.

5.9.2 The concept of vision in Isaac's theology

The distinction between Creator and creation specific to the East Syriac theology is clearly present in the discourses of Isaac of Niniveh. If we are to quote only one short fragment it will suffice to argue this idea: "La verità è celata nel suo essere a tutto quanto ha creato e gli esseri dotati di ragione, divenuti per sua causa, abitano lunghi da essa, a grande distanza". And yet, he accepts that in the eschatological time the truth will be revealed, but not its limit which is "hidden in his Essence"¹⁴²².

In fact, the entire ascetical work leads to the perception of the eschatological realities in what Isaac calls "vision", "theoria" and "amazement". In the Third collection, one can find a paragraph where Isaac asserts that by prayer the human being can attain the vision of the kingdom in Christ: "By means of converse in prayer, He has brought us near to the vision¹⁴²³ of the Heavenly Kingdom and continual meditation of what is in it"¹⁴²⁴ in the adoration of the Spirit in Christ offered to the Father. The adoration of the Spirit or the spiritual prayer is achieved "in the mind by its stirrings"¹⁴²⁵. Isaac defines it as "uninterrupted stupor"¹⁴²⁶ on account of God... it happens in the places without corporeal realities... wonder¹⁴²⁷ is its minister and instead of faith

¹⁴²⁰ Timothée, *Lettres*, ed. 1914, p. 192, trad. Latin Timothée, *Lettres*, 1915, p. 131-132.

¹⁴²¹ For details see Vittorio Berti, *Le débat sur la vision de Dieu et la condamnation des mystiques par Timothée I^{er}*, p. 171-173.

¹⁴²² ܬܝܡܝܬܝܐ II, 3.1, 2; the same terminology at *Commentarius in Evangelium Iohannis Apostoli*, ed. by J. M. Vosté, CSCO 115-116/ 62-63, 1940, p. 248, 294.

¹⁴²³ ܬܝܡܝܬܝܐ.

¹⁴²⁴ III, 3, 32.

¹⁴²⁵ ܬܝܡܝܬܝܐ.

¹⁴²⁶ ܬܝܡܝܬܝܐ.

¹⁴²⁷ ܬܝܡܝܬܝܐ.

providing the wings for prayer there is the true vision¹⁴²⁸ of that in which consists our kingdom and our glory”¹⁴²⁹.

We identify in the quotations above three important concepts employed by Isaac in order to express the spiritual stage – stirrings, stupor/ wonder and vision. The type of knowledge at this level is described as admiration before the heavenly realities by means of these cognitive forms that surpass the normal human way of knowing. There, “the whole truth”¹⁴³⁰ concerning God the creator will be achieved. At this point he clearly points to the distinction between God’s nature¹⁴³¹, that remains inaccessible and transcendent, and His glory¹⁴³² and love¹⁴³³ for humans, accessible to them. The quantitative criterion for knowledge disappears as well as the petition prayer, which has its very role of leading the mind “to wander in the Essence of God and in the knowledge of His care for us”. In technical terms we call that Economy and Theology. What is accessible for humans and pertains to the life to come is described by Isaac as kingdom, glory, greatness, magnificence, power of his essence. The result will be the clothing of people in God’s light. This state of knowledge takes human to the filial quality regarding the relation to the Father¹⁴³⁴.

The necessary instrument to achieving this eschatological knowledge is faith, not simply in its primary sense, as argued above, but more as a result of the collaboration between human’s ability and active participation on one side, and the divine intervention on the other side. He asserts:

*Faith is the gate of mysteries. What the bodily eye is for the things of the senses, the same is faith in connection with the treasures hidden to the eyes of the mind. We possess two psychic eyes, just as we possess two bodily eyes. But both have not the same purpose as to sight. With one we see the hidden glory of God which is concealed in the things of nature... His peculiar providence unto us..., the spiritual classes of our fellow-beings. With the other we see the glory of His holy nature*¹⁴³⁵.

One can easily identify the distinction between the knowledge out of the contemplation of God’s providence and that regarding God himself, by means of his glory, that is his direct revelation to people. I will first deal with the term “theoria”, often rendered with

¹⁴²⁸ ἡ ἀληθινή θεωρία.

¹⁴²⁹ III, 3, 33.

¹⁴³⁰ ἡ ὅλη ἀλήθεια.

¹⁴³¹ ἡ οὐσία. The same idea is expressed in the first collection: “According as a man becomes perfect in his relation to God, will he follow His closely. In the world of truth, He will show His face, not however the face of His essence” (I, 45, p. 217; B, 324)

¹⁴³² ἡ δόξα.

¹⁴³³ ἡ ἀγάπη.

¹⁴³⁴ III, 3, 38-39.

¹⁴³⁵ I, 43, p. 210 (B, 315).

“contemplation”¹⁴³⁶ into modern languages. We have already analyzed it in the chapter dedicated to terminology, therefore, now, as a continuation, we are going to picture it within the general discussion around the concept of divine vision. On the concept of “theoria” and its origin, Sebastian Brock dedicated a detailed study on its use and history¹⁴³⁷. From the very beginning, he argues the only Syriac early writers who used it were John the Solitary and Philoxenus of Mabbug. The wide spreading of the concept occurred thanks to the Syriac translation of Evagrius and Dionysian Corpus. Among the later East Syriac writers who used it frequently he mentions Sahdona, Babai, Gregory of Cyprus, Isaac of Niniveh, Dadisho and Simon Taibuteh. Regarding Isaac, he employs the term more than 150 times, mostly at singular and, occasionally, at plural¹⁴³⁸.

¹⁴³⁶ The Western translators, opting for the term “contemplation”, are forced to acknowledge its inability to play the entire contents of the original term. We remember that André Louf claims that by “theoria” Isaac speaks about refers to the highest stage of spiritual knowledge, while “contemplation” refers mostly to human ascetical labour of the noetic faculty. Dana Miller states that “contemplation” presupposes a deep psychological connotation, referring to creating of images in the imagination or reflections, in connection with specific meditations on creation and the divine things, while “theoria” describes the work of the Spirit in the intellect which makes human to deepen the mysteries of God and creation, hidden to the rational human mind. He calls this knowledge supra-conceptual and defines it as revelation from above. For this reason he renders the term “theoria” by “divine vision”. Placide Deseille tries to describe this concept by using the expression of J. Maritain, “knowledge by connaturality”, having as starting point Isaac’s description as “divine vision in the mirror of human’s soul”, concept familiar to some other Church writers, in particular Gregory of Nyssa. The soul is able to know God by going deep into itself, as within it one identifies the divine image. For that the purification of the intellect is also necessary. In consequence, love is intellection. In Isaac’s case, this connaturality of the soul with God (not in a platonic sense) resides in the love of the neighbour, up to assume his suffering, as well as his corrupted state.

¹⁴³⁷ “Some Uses of the Term *theoria* in the Writings of Isaac of Niniveh”, *Parole de l’Orient*, 20 (1995-6), p. 407-419.

¹⁴³⁸ In Brock’s study attention has been focused on three syntactical constructions: *theoria* followed by an adjective (essential/ I, 187, 198; divine/ I, p. 23, 31, 161, 198, 571; II, 3.4, 98, 19, 5; exact, precise/ I, p. 521; single, singular/ II, 3, 2.8, 10; natural/ I, p. 31, II, 3.2, 105, 3.9, 57; angelic/ II, 3.3, 90; that defies investigation/ II, 39, 1; exalted/ I, p. 571; double/ II, 3.1, 68; first/ I, p. 31, 303, II, 3.2, 7, 10; spiritual/ I, p. 522, 528, II, 7.1; lofty/ I, p. 521, II, 3.1 title; true/ I, p. 162, II, 3.4, 85; heavenly/ I, p. 134, 307), *theoria* followed by a dependent genitive (of the noun: mysteries/ II, 39, 1, 40 title, 41, 2; cross/ II, 11 title; of the Being of the Divinity/ II, 3.2, 4; of the divine care/ II, 3.2, 73; the creative activity of God/ II, 3.2, 73; created things, creatures/ I, p. 172; the inhumanity/ I, p. 161; corporeal bodies/ II, 3.3, 49, 3.4, 11; the properties of Christ/ II, 3.1, 44; judgement/ I, p. 191; II, 3.1, 51, 3.2, 102, 39, 23; gold/ II, 3.3, 90; things that have come into being/ II, 3.3, 49, 57; immaterial objects/ I, p. 303; the just/ I, p. 193; blessed stirrings/ I, p. 521; vision/ II, 10, 17; sinners/ I, p. 193; wisdom/ II, 3.2, 73; variations of judgements/ I, p. 193; Passion of Christ/ II, 3.4, 82; his sternal thought/ II, 3.2, 18; noetic/ intelligible things/ I, p. 50; the Scriptures/ I, p. 127, II, 3.1, 41, 15, 8; the angels/ I, p. 31, 197, II, 3.3, 92; words/ II, 36.1; world to come/ I, p. 433, II, 3.3, 56; labours of his service/ II, 3.4, 44; service, ministration/ I, p. 337; the exemplar/ II, 2.2, 72; discernments/ II, 3.2, 5; things, objects/ I, p. 50, 154; prayer/ I, p. 326; himself, themselves/ I, p. 304; truth/ I, p. 195, 197, 222; the spirit/ I, p. 217, 303; II, 3.2, 10, 35, 4; the mind/ I, p. 126, II, 11, 32; the entire principle/ II, 3.1, 7; the Trinity/ II, 3.3, 57; second/ II, 3.3, 57) and *theoria* standing in genitival relationship to a preceding noun (noun of *theoria*: seeking/ II, 39, 1; utterance/ II, 3.2, 4; revelations/ I, p. 87; mode of life/ II, 12 title; exercise, training/ I, p. 307; meditation/ II, 36, 1; vision/ II, 1; sweetness/ I, p. 328; fullness/ I, p. 135, II, 3.1, 41; eloquent in/ II, 3.2, 8; portion, part/ II, 19, 6; light/ I, p. 200, 550; II, 3.1, 29; aim/ II, 3.1, 62, 3.3, 9; multitude, density/ II, 3.1, 32; sum, limit/ II, 20, 23; ascent/ I, p. 16, 223; conversant with/ II, 39, 1; converse/ II, 12, 1; investigator/ II, 29, 9; discernments/ II, 3.2, 10; revelations exalted in / II, 10, 24; glory/ II, 3.2, 7; disparity, imbalance/ I, p. 192-193; fulfilment/ II, 3.1, 72; other matters/ II, 38 title). At the end of the analysis he clearly states: “The extent of Isaac’s debt to Evagrian language stands out very clearly from the above listing... The Dionysian Corpus did not exert any strong influence on Isaac and this is reflected in the

Isaac himself explains to his readers the concept as “vision of the spirit”¹⁴³⁹, or “non apperceptible mental revelation”¹⁴⁴⁰, “profoundness of the soul’s vision/ depth of psychic sight”¹⁴⁴¹, “apprehension of the divine mysteries”¹⁴⁴² which are hidden in the things spoken”¹⁴⁴³. I will quote now a suggestive fragment from Isaac’s discourse where he deals with this concept. He establishes a synonymy of terms when describing the spiritual conduct: “(Spiritual prayer)... is inner sight”¹⁴⁴⁴ and not the impulse and the beseeching of prayer... from there it will conduct them by *theoria*¹⁴⁴⁵, which is interpreted spiritual sight”¹⁴⁴⁶.

In the line of Evagrius’ stages, Isaac speaks about the “contemplation of nature”¹⁴⁴⁷ and of “divine Providence”¹⁴⁴⁸, “contemplation of the soul”¹⁴⁴⁹, “angelic contemplation”¹⁴⁵⁰, “heavenly contemplation”¹⁴⁵¹ and the *theoria* or the vision of God¹⁴⁵², when the intellect is moved without senses by the spiritual powers. He calls that “unitary/ monadic knowledge”. The hierarchy of this cognitive form is given, according to Isaac, by the insights that accompany every moment¹⁴⁵³. If bodily conduct purifies the body from material passions¹⁴⁵⁴, mental discipline cleanses the soul from impulses¹⁴⁵⁵ and changes their affectible nature into motions of contemplation¹⁴⁵⁶. This last state leads the soul to the “nakedness of the mind”¹⁴⁵⁷,

rather small number of phrases with *theoria* that he has in common with Sergius’ translation of the work...” (*Some Uses of the Term theoria in the Writings of Isaac of Niniveh*, p. 418). For other details see Sebastian Brock, “Discerning the Evagrian in the writings of Isaac of Niniveh: a preliminary investigation”, *Adamantius* 15 (2009), p. 60-72 (here 68-69) and Sabino Chialà, *Evagrio il Pontico negli scritti di Isacco di Ninive*, p. 73-84.

¹⁴³⁹ ܡܘܝܢ ܪܫܝܐ “spiritual sight” (Wensinck); I, 35, p. 175 (B, 260).

¹⁴⁴⁰ ܪܫܝܐ ܕܠܝܠܐ ܕܠܝܠܐ; Literally – “of the intellect”, I, 20, p. 109 (B, 161).

¹⁴⁴¹ ܪܫܝܐ ܕܠܝܠܐ ܕܠܝܠܐ; I, 15, p. 87 (B, 128).

¹⁴⁴² ܪܫܝܐ ܕܠܝܠܐ ܕܠܝܠܐ.

¹⁴⁴³ I, 2, p. 12 (B, 17).

¹⁴⁴⁴ ܪܫܝܐ ܕܠܝܠܐ.

¹⁴⁴⁵ ܪܫܝܐ.

¹⁴⁴⁶ ܡܘܝܢ ܪܫܝܐ; I, 35, p. 174-175 (B, 160).

¹⁴⁴⁷ III, 6,2.

¹⁴⁴⁸ III, 1,7,17.

¹⁴⁴⁹ ܪܫܝܐ ܕܠܝܠܐ; III, 9,2.

¹⁴⁵⁰ ܪܫܝܐ ܕܠܝܠܐ; II, III, 3.90; The angels fill the human with “spiritual visions” (ܪܫܝܐ ܕܠܝܠܐ) – Evagrius, *Praktikos* 76 –, illuminations (ܪܫܝܐ), intuitions and contemplations of all kind (ܡܘܝܢ ܕܠܝܠܐ ܕܠܝܠܐ), II, 3, 3,92.

¹⁴⁵¹ ܪܫܝܐ ܕܠܝܠܐ; I, 43, p. 345 (B, 307).

¹⁴⁵² III, 2,7; 5,17.

¹⁴⁵³ „Contemplation is said to be sublime or imperfect by what leads it from insight (ܪܫܝܐ) to insight, according to the sense of the things which are moved in them. These realities are of the order of the revelation of the mysteries. Of all which is accomplished in the soul, this is the most sublime. It is the way of the Spirit (ܪܫܝܐ ܡܘܝܢ)” (III, 9, 19). The evolution is performed again within the tripartite division of the spiritual life.

¹⁴⁵⁴ By bodily labours, personal work.

¹⁴⁵⁵ It is the work of the heart, the incessant meditation on the judgment and providence, incessant prayer of heart and the domain of inner affections.

¹⁴⁵⁶ ܪܫܝܐ ܕܠܝܠܐ ܕܠܝܠܐ.

¹⁴⁵⁷ ܪܫܝܐ ܕܠܝܠܐ ܕܠܝܠܐ.

associated with “immaterial contemplation”¹⁴⁵⁸. At this stage, the mind is elevated to what Isaac calls “primordial spiritual contemplation”¹⁴⁵⁹, described as “sight of unspeakable glory”¹⁴⁶⁰ of the eschatological reality. This occurs with the saints who achieve “personal contemplation”¹⁴⁶¹. The sight¹⁴⁶² will be further spiritual¹⁴⁶³. Here Isaac correlates the concept of vision with that of knowledge when he names this spiritual contemplation “solitary/ unitary knowledge”¹⁴⁶⁴ that, occasionally, is described with “stupor/ wonder”¹⁴⁶⁵ before God. All these technical phrases seem to describe a single reality – the order of the future state after resurrection¹⁴⁶⁶.

From the text above, one can mention some general observations around this concept. Firstly, “theoria/ contemplation” pertains to the natural knowledge, out of nature and due to the angelic revelations, on the one hand, as well as to the spiritual knowledge, that is the vision of God. We will give one example from the Second collection, the third centuria. There Isaac indicates a qualitative difference between the “revelation of the spiritual knowledge”¹⁴⁶⁷ and the corporeal contemplation and the contemplation of incorporeals¹⁴⁶⁸. If the last two categories pertain to the created beings, the first one is generated by the revelations of the future world¹⁴⁶⁹. He courageously describes it as “knowledge of the Essence”¹⁴⁷⁰. He indicates it in singular, while the other forms in plural, suggesting its full objective character – “knowledge of the One”¹⁴⁷¹, in wonder¹⁴⁷², without being interrupted”, or the “vision of the Holy Trinity”¹⁴⁷³, the limit of any cognitive revelation¹⁴⁷⁴.

Isaac joins the attribute “immaterial”, as referring to the noetic faculties as well as to the absence of any material impulses. He successively underlines that “theoria” is spiritual, indicating the source, and adds the attribute “primordial”, which probably refers to an

¹⁴⁵⁸ Լուսն ըն յայտնի

¹⁴⁵⁹ ասի Կաթողիկոս Կաթողիկոս

¹⁴⁶⁰ Լուսն ըն ընտանի Կաթողիկոս; see the presence of glory in the context of the discussion above.

¹⁴⁶¹ Երեսման Կաթողիկոս

¹⁴⁶² Կաթողիկոս

¹⁴⁶³ Կաթողիկոս

¹⁴⁶⁴ Կաթողիկոս Կաթողիկոս

¹⁴⁶⁵ Կաթողիկոս

¹⁴⁶⁶ I, 50, p. 202-203 (B, 303-304).

¹⁴⁶⁷ Կաթողիկոս Կաթողիկոս Կաթողիկոս

¹⁴⁶⁸ Կաթողիկոս Կաթողիկոս Կաթողիկոս

¹⁴⁶⁹ Կաթողիկոս Կաթողիկոս Կաթողիկոս

¹⁴⁷⁰ Կաթողիկոս Կաթողիկոս

¹⁴⁷¹ Կաթողիկոս

¹⁴⁷² Կաթողիկոս

¹⁴⁷³ Կաթողիկոս Կաթողիկոս Կաթողիկոս

¹⁴⁷⁴ II, 3.3, 48-49.

originary state¹⁴⁷⁵. This spiritual theoria points to partaking God's ineffable glory¹⁴⁷⁶, as anticipation of the life to come. Finally, theoria, as wonder¹⁴⁷⁷ before God, is "monadic knowledge"¹⁴⁷⁸, the highest cognitive state.

Next to "theoria", in the same terminological sphere, there are two other forms of knowledge related to the previous one, what Isaac calls simply "vision" (ܐܝܢܐ) correlated with "revelation" (ܐܝܠܐ), occasionally regarded as synonymous, both referring to an immediate contact with spiritual realities. There is still one semantic difference highlighted by Isaac – revelation is a larger concept that encompasses vision. The first one is always colligated with the intelligible things and achieved at the noetic level, while the latter pertains more to the senses and occurs in similitudes. Divine sight¹⁴⁷⁹ is defined by Isaac as "non-apperceptible mental revelation"¹⁴⁸⁰ and the divine revelation¹⁴⁸¹ "emotion"¹⁴⁸² of the mind by spiritual understanding¹⁴⁸³, concerning the divine being"¹⁴⁸⁴.

Isaac identifies two qualitative types of revelations: about the New World – which concern the transformation of creation (visible and invisible) experience in the light of the eschatological reality, revealed to the mind by various insights¹⁴⁸⁵, as the result of continual reflection on them; and of the New World, which concern the divine nature of the divine majesty. The first category of revelations seems to come closer to what Isaac calls "vision"¹⁴⁸⁶; its epistemology presupposes analogy. This one can only give a sense about divine action, but it is not the exact truth, while the latter, by means of insights, with no mental analogy, points to the knowledge of the divine nature. This experience is given very rarely.

¹⁴⁷⁵ Despite this fact, Isaac does not support the idea of perfection in Paradise.

¹⁴⁷⁶ Salient theme of Isaac's theological contemporary dispute.

¹⁴⁷⁷ Wensinck translates "temha" with "ecstasy", but, as I will detail later on, more proper is stupor/ wonder, as Isaac does not really use the concept of ecstasy, but more enstasy.

¹⁴⁷⁸ ܐܝܢܐ ܐܝܠܐ.

¹⁴⁷⁹ ܐܝܢܐ ܐܝܠܐ.

¹⁴⁸⁰ ܐܝܢܐ ܐܝܠܐ ܐܝܠܐ ܐܝܠܐ.

¹⁴⁸¹ ܐܝܢܐ ܐܝܠܐ.

¹⁴⁸² ܐܝܢܐ ܐܝܠܐ ܐܝܠܐ; We prefer "impulse" that does not involve a psychological connotation.

¹⁴⁸³ ܐܝܢܐ ܐܝܠܐ.

¹⁴⁸⁴ ܐܝܢܐ ܐܝܠܐ.

¹⁴⁸⁵ ܐܝܢܐ. It encompasses a whole semantic spectrum, such as: intuition, sense, understanding, not referring to a strict rational knowledge, but involving the direct action of the Holy Spirit. One particularity of this form of knowledge is that it begins from a material reality (meditating on Scripture or the mystery of salvation, II, 3.2,14.) and meets either the revelations of angels or of the Holy Spirit Himself (II, 3.3,91). In French – "intuitions" (insights), while in Italian – "comprensione" (understanding). One can say that the "insight" is a short immediate contact with the eschatological reality. According to Isaac's perception, this occurs when one reaches the perfection in the stage of the soul, as a foretaste and guarantee of the spiritual stage. This experience lasts very short time and makes the mind motionless (II, 20,19).

¹⁴⁸⁶ This connection is also suggested by the difference he makes between revelations with images for simple people and revelations without images for perfect people, as intelligible apperceptions I, 19, p. 108 (B, 118-119).

In the First collection, Isaac dedicates an entire discourse to the revelation in respect to the natural knowledge, based on “study of wisdom”, “intellectual labour” and “mental investigation”. One can identify a clear epistemology: “revelation is silence of intellect¹⁴⁸⁷” and, in consequence, knowledge is not an achievement of any mental or sense activity, but it is generated out of the direct intervention of the Holy Spirit by the means of revelation: “by zealous efforts¹⁴⁸⁸ and human thoughts¹⁴⁸⁹ no one can imagine that he has found knowledge; this happens by spiritual power¹⁴⁹⁰ so that he to whom the revelation is imparted, at that time is not aware of any thought of his soul¹⁴⁹¹ nor of those things which present themselves to his senses”¹⁴⁹². Or, in another place, Isaac asserts: “The mind¹⁴⁹³ will see hidden things. Then the Holy Spirit will begin to reveal unto it heavenly things, while God dwells in thee and promotes spiritual fruits in thee”¹⁴⁹⁴. One can identify here again the difference he makes between worldly knowledge¹⁴⁹⁵, out of instruction (with a discursive content)¹⁴⁹⁶, and spiritual knowledge, not a product of ascetic exercises, but a free gift of the Spirit, in the revelation¹⁴⁹⁷. In the same discourse Isaac evokes six types of revelation that we have already evoked above, as way of transmission of divine knowledge. He mentions the source of this list – Theodore of Mopsuestia – in his commentaries on the book of Genesis, Job, the Twelve Prophets, Matthew and the Acts. We will remember at large the six ranks of revelation, described as forms of vision.

The first category refers to the revelation perceived with the senses¹⁴⁹⁸, divided in two: the first one occurs by means of a sensitive experience, while the second by means of a representation connected with the sensible world. The first one uses the sensible elements, the second is immaterial – psychic vision. Isaac encompasses in the first category the burning bush, the cloud accompanying the people of Israel in the desert, or the Table of Laws and in the second one the tabernacle, Jacob’s ladder, the light that blinded St Paul, perceptible with the senses, as it was heard and seen also by those who were with him, and yet, spiritual in

¹⁴⁸⁷ *ἡσυχία καὶ ἡσυχία.*

¹⁴⁸⁸ *ἡσυχία*; this might be assimilated with the bodily conduct.

¹⁴⁸⁹ *ἡσυχία καὶ ἡσυχία*; associated with the conduct of the soul.

¹⁴⁹⁰ *ἡσυχία καὶ ἡσυχία.*

¹⁴⁹¹ *ἡσυχία καὶ ἡσυχία.*

¹⁴⁹² I, 19, p. 105 (B, 155).

¹⁴⁹³ *ἡσυχία.*

¹⁴⁹⁴ I, 14, p. 86 (B, 126-127).

¹⁴⁹⁵ See II, 3.1,4.

¹⁴⁹⁶ Reason – thinking, reasonability – ability to think, not circumscribed to logical reasoning, discursiveness and argumentation.

¹⁴⁹⁷ And yet, the gift is not separated from ascetic struggle.

¹⁴⁹⁸ *ἡσυχία.*

content, as the light they have seen was not material and natural. Therefore, it was about an incomprehensible and immaterial perception, generated by the divine presence. The theme of light comes out clearly here: “They did not see Jesus, because that which appeared was even no sensible light¹⁴⁹⁹, but an incomprehensible apperception¹⁵⁰⁰ which in an immaterial¹⁵⁰¹ way was given him by divine action in the likeness of a vision of light¹⁵⁰², so that he thought that the heavens were opened”¹⁵⁰³.

The second category, more subtle, occurs this time at the level of the soul, by the means of what Isaac calls “the eyes of the soul”¹⁵⁰⁴ in “the vision of the soul”¹⁵⁰⁵. Isaac gives three examples, two from the Old Testament – Isaiah 6, Ezekiel 1 – and one from the New Testament – Acts 10. He does not detail these moments, but regarding the vision of Peter, in the introduction of the discourse, he makes some important highlights – there is no mental movement of thoughts¹⁵⁰⁶, no sensual apperceptions¹⁵⁰⁷, as they were in a state of wonder¹⁵⁰⁸. Paolo Bettolo identifies at this point parallels with the commentaries on the Book of Genesis and Exodus of Theodore of Mopsuestia, Ishodad of Merv and Theodore bar Koni¹⁵⁰⁹ within a specific Christological frame. More specifically, while interpreting the event described in Acts 10, Theodore of Mopsuestia pictures a parallel between Christ and the prophets. By means of the conjunction¹⁵¹⁰ between the “homo assumptus” with the “verbum assumens” the man who was taken by God the Word became the recipient of all thoughts “by which the divine economy of the whole creation is performed”. Therefore, a perfect communication and a transfer between the divine nature and the assumed man in matter of thoughts become visible. And this state is specific for receiving the divine revelation as in the case of Peter and the prophets¹⁵¹¹.

¹⁴⁹⁹ ܠܥܝܢܐ ܕܝܗܘܐ ܕܝܡܝܢܐ ܕܠܥܝܢܐ

¹⁵⁰⁰ ܠܥܝܢܐ ܕܝܗܘܐ ܕܝܡܝܢܐ ܕܠܥܝܢܐ ܕܝܡܝܢܐ

¹⁵⁰¹ ܠܥܝܢܐ ܕܝܗܘܐ ܕܝܡܝܢܐ ܕܠܥܝܢܐ

¹⁵⁰² ܠܥܝܢܐ ܕܝܗܘܐ ܕܝܡܝܢܐ ܕܠܥܝܢܐ

¹⁵⁰³ I, 19, p. 107 (B, 157).

¹⁵⁰⁴ ܠܥܝܢܐ ܕܝܗܘܐ ܕܝܡܝܢܐ ܕܠܥܝܢܐ

¹⁵⁰⁵ ܠܥܝܢܐ ܕܝܗܘܐ ܕܝܡܝܢܐ ܕܠܥܝܢܐ

¹⁵⁰⁶ ܠܥܝܢܐ ܕܝܗܘܐ ܕܝܡܝܢܐ ܕܠܥܝܢܐ

¹⁵⁰⁷ ܠܥܝܢܐ ܕܝܗܘܐ ܕܝܡܝܢܐ ܕܠܥܝܢܐ

¹⁵⁰⁸ ܠܥܝܢܐ ܕܝܗܘܐ ܕܝܡܝܢܐ ܕܠܥܝܢܐ

¹⁵⁰⁹ For details see “Révélations et visions dans l’œuvre d’Isaac de Ninive: le cadre d’école d’un enseignement spirituel”, in *Les mystiques syriaques*. ed. by Desreumaux, Alain. Études syriaques 8. Paris: Geuthner, 2011, p. 99-119 (here 106-107).

¹⁵¹⁰ ܠܥܝܢܐ ܕܝܗܘܐ ܕܝܡܝܢܐ ܕܠܥܝܢܐ

¹⁵¹¹ Gerrit Reinink, “The Quotations from the Lost Works of Theodoret of Cyrus and Theodore of Mopsuestia in an Unpublished East Syrian Work on Christology”, in E. A. Livingstone, *Studia Patristica* 33, Leuven, p. 562-567 (here 565-566), cf. Paolo Bettolo, *Révélations et visions*, p. 107.

and revelations without images, by intelligible apperception¹⁵²⁶. He considers the latter one the highest form of understanding, the perfection of knowledge¹⁵²⁷.

In the act of revelation the role of angels is prominent. There are two important aspects to be mentioned. Firstly, the revelation through angels occurs through senses and reflects God's Economy, and secondly, in the line of Pseudo Dyonisius¹⁵²⁸, it comes from top to bottom¹⁵²⁹, from the highest hosts to those closer to humans. We will give two examples from Isaac's Second collection to picture these ideas. In the third centuria, Isaac asserts that the angelic revelation occurs through dreams or senses¹⁵³⁰. A few paragraphs later Isaac brings some nuances when it comes to the revelations of angels. Again he argues the idea that, generally, these kinds of revelation occur through senses, but he indicates a difference between the revelations and the contemplation¹⁵³¹ of angels that occurs "in modo nascostos e tramite movimenti dell'intelligenza¹⁵³² mossi dall'illuminazione¹⁵³³ che effondono in noi". The vision of angels is achieved in the movements the thought stands in silence. To base his opinion he quotes Evagrius who places the spiritual vision on the top of the qualitative revelational evolution: "I santi angeli, quando si avvicinano a noi, ci reimpiono di visione spirituale¹⁵³⁴, cioè (di) illuminazioni¹⁵³⁵ e intellezioni¹⁵³⁶ e contemplazioni¹⁵³⁷ di ogni sorta"¹⁵³⁸. This final level occurs at the inner level and characterises the "spiritual man"¹⁵³⁹.

An apparent contradiction appears here in Isaac's epistemological discourse. Despite the fact that Isaac considers the revelation free of images, he places nonetheless the concept itself in a rapport of inferiority regarding the process of knowledge and the truth itself. One can identify three reasons for this idea: it is dependent on the spiritual abilities of the receiver, it encompasses a partial truth, and the inspiration provided by it is transient. Isaac asserts:

¹⁵²⁴ כְּחֵדָּה.

¹⁵²⁵ כְּיִיזָה כְּחֵדָּה, וְכֵן כְּחֵדָּה כְּחֵדָּה.

¹⁵²⁶ כְּחֵדָּה כְּחֵדָּה כְּחֵדָּה.

¹⁵²⁷ כְּחֵדָּה כְּחֵדָּה.

¹⁵²⁸ Or, as highlighted above, a common tradition, spread in the theological popular instruction.

¹⁵²⁹ II, 3.3, 56-57.

¹⁵³⁰ II, 3.3, 59.

¹⁵³¹ כְּחֵדָּה.

¹⁵³² כְּחֵדָּה כְּחֵדָּה.

¹⁵³³ כְּחֵדָּה כְּחֵדָּה.

¹⁵³⁴ כְּחֵדָּה כְּחֵדָּה.

¹⁵³⁵ כְּחֵדָּה.

¹⁵³⁶ כְּחֵדָּה.

¹⁵³⁷ כְּחֵדָּה כְּחֵדָּה.

¹⁵³⁸ II, 3.3, 91-92.

¹⁵³⁹ כְּחֵדָּה כְּחֵדָּה.

Revelation (ܠܬܠܝܬܐ)... is different from truth (ܚܝܬܐ) and knowledge (ܡܠܝܬܐ) in so far as revelation is not the exact truth, but only shows indications and signs corresponding to human strength... The mysteries that are attained by the mind through insights into the divine nature¹⁵⁴⁰ are different from the action by which the intellect is inspired during certain times. It is not absolutely necessary that everyone to whom a revelation is imparted or who is influenced¹⁵⁴¹ by a consoling action must know the truth¹⁵⁴² and the exact knowledge¹⁵⁴³ concerning God¹⁵⁴⁴.

“Real knowledge” refers to metaphysical issues: divine nature, its qualities or the understanding of his will towards humankind, attained by the mind during “the insights into the divine nature”¹⁵⁴⁵, often pictured by Isaac with the term “intuition”, “good rendering”¹⁵⁴⁶. Therefore, he suggested that revelation should not be called knowledge, but rather “overshadowing”¹⁵⁴⁷ caused by the direct intervention of the Spirit.

Isaac develops this concept in an entire discourse, insisting on the role of the Holy Spirit. We will quote the paragraph where he analyses the concept¹⁵⁴⁸ at large;

“Maggnanutha” is a term designating help and protection and also the receiving of a heavenly gift; for example: “The Holy Spirit shall come and the Power of the Most High shall overshadow you” (Luke 1:35). The former kind is involved in “Cause your right hand, Lord, to overshadow me” (Psalm 138:7), which is a request for help... We

¹⁵⁴⁰ ܡܠܝܬܐ ܡܠܝܬܐ.

¹⁵⁴¹ ܡܠܝܬܐ (overshadow).

¹⁵⁴² ܚܝܬܐ.

¹⁵⁴³ ܡܠܝܬܐ ܡܠܝܬܐ.

¹⁵⁴⁴ I, 19, p. 108-109 (B, p. 160).

¹⁵⁴⁵ ܡܠܝܬܐ ܡܠܝܬܐ ܡܠܝܬܐ ܡܠܝܬܐ; I, 19, p. 109 (B, 160).

¹⁵⁴⁶ ܡܠܝܬܐ.

¹⁵⁴⁷ ܡܠܝܬܐ ܡܠܝܬܐ; On the concept of overshadowing see Sebastian Brock, “*Maggnanuta*: a Technical Term in East Syrian Spirituality and its Background”, *Mélanges Antoine Guillaumont – Contributions à l’étude des christianismes orientaux*, Genève, 1988, p. 121-129; Valentin Vesa, “The Liturgical Epiclesis as Image for Mystical Life in the Syriac Tradition. The Role of the Holy Spirit in Incarnation, Eucharist and Spiritual Prayer”, in *Euharistie, Spovedanie, Martiriu. Lucrările Simpozionului Internațional al Facultății de Teologie Ortodoxă din Cluj-Napoca (3-5 noiembrie 2014)*, vol. I, Cluj-Napoca, Renașterea, 2014, p. 226-239.

¹⁵⁴⁸ The origin of this concept is found in Gabriel’s words of Annunciation, Luke 1:35: “The Holy Spirit shall come upon you and the power of Most High shall overshadow (ܡܠܝܬܐ ܡܠܝܬܐ ܡܠܝܬܐ ܡܠܝܬܐ) you; for this reason that which is born of you shall be called *holy*, the Son of God”; and the prologue of John 1:14: “The Word became flesh and dwelt” (ܡܠܝܬܐ ܡܠܝܬܐ ܡܠܝܬܐ ܡܠܝܬܐ) in/ among us”. While interpreting the two verses regarding Christ’s Incarnation, this term provoked Christological disputes between the East and West Syrians. Sebastian Brock states that for the East Syriac writers the “shadowing” refers to the Holy Spirit, designated with “the Most High” too, while for the West Syriac authors, the Holy Spirit comes first to sanctify Virgin Mary and then follows the Logos, the “Most High”, who will “overshadow” Virgin Mary. The second verse brought too different interpretations in the fifth-sixth century. The difficult issue was the phrase “dwelt in/ among us”. The Antiochene writers understood “in us” as “in the flesh”, in one of us, that is the assumed Man. Therefore, the verse describes the relationship between the Word of God and the assumed Man. The Western interpretation points to a difference between “became flesh”, as referring to the conception, and “dwelt in us” to the birth. In this case “aggen” is synonym with “was born”. The expression “in us”, transformed into “among us”, “one of us”, “in Mary”, occasionally has been freely interpreted as “in us, who have received Christ’s Spirit and baptism” (For details see Sebastian Brock, *Maggnanuta: a Technical Term in East Syrian Spirituality*, p. 125-126). This final commentary gives us a generous space for using this element so that to symbolically describe the mystical life.

understand two kinds of action in the maggnautha granted by God unto mankind: one is symbolical¹⁵⁴⁹ and intelligible¹⁵⁵⁰; the other is practical¹⁵⁵¹. The former is connected with the holiness which is received through divine grace; in other words, when, through the operation of the Holy Spirit, someone is sanctified in his body and soul, as was the case with Elijah, John the Baptist and the Holy Mary, blessed among women – although in her case it was unique, going beyond the case of other created beings; turning to partial maggnanutha which occurs with other holy men and women, the mysterious variety of maggnanutha such as takes place with any holy person, is an active power which overshadows¹⁵⁵² the mind and when someone is held worthy of this maggnanutha, the mind is seized and dilated¹⁵⁵³ with the sense of wonder¹⁵⁵⁴, in a sort of divine revelation¹⁵⁵⁵. As long as this divine action overshadows the mind, that person is raised above the emotions brought about by the thoughts of his soul, thanks to the participation of the Holy Spirit... This is one mysterious kind of maggnanutha: when this power overshadows a person, he is held worthy of the glory of the New World by means of revelation. This is partial maggnautha which has been lot of the saints in light... on account of their holy and excellent behaviour.

The other maggnautha, whose working is experienced in practical terms, is a spiritual power which protects and hovers over someone continuously, driving from him anything harmful which may happen to approach his body or soul¹⁵⁵⁶

In the excerpt quoted above there are some fundamental terms that depict the revelation described as “overshadowing”. Firstly, Isaac divides it into two – one symbolical and intelligible and the other practical. The latter category is quite general and pertains to normal people. He is interested more in the former category that occurs at the noetic level by means of the direct intervention of the Holy Spirit, as occurred fully with Virgin Mary at Christ’s conception and partially with the saints. During this mysterious revelation, the mind is seized and dilated, surpassing any emotions, in a state of amazement. There are two other important terms in this text, strictly connected with our discussion – the glory of the kingdom and the light, both analysed above in reference with the object of knowledge and vision.

Isaac does not say anything here about the knowledge of divine nature, but he only deals with the cognitive medium, represented by the two concepts. In other places he indicates a hierarchy of the revelation that occur by the intervention of angels and the revelation of the Spirit. If the first category is circumscribed to the creatural order, the second one, generated

¹⁵⁴⁹ *ḥalukim*.

¹⁵⁵⁰ *ḥalukim*.

¹⁵⁵¹ *ḥalukim*.

¹⁵⁵² *ḥalukim*.

¹⁵⁵³ *ḥalukim* (ḥalukim - means to take by force, seize, with a fairly violent sense).

¹⁵⁵⁴ *ḥalukim*.

¹⁵⁵⁵ *ḥalukim*.

¹⁵⁵⁶ I, 54, p. 261-262 (B, 390-391); II, 16, 5.

by the Spirit, refers to the “holy Nature”¹⁵⁵⁷ and “the contemplation of the world to come”¹⁵⁵⁸ in the mind¹⁵⁵⁹, and yet, it is still a paradoxical knowledge, not of the nature itself, as we have seen above.

The last quotation creates bridges with another concrete intuitive form of knowledge, strictly connected with vision too – generally rendered by two quite synonymous terms – *ḥayyā* and *ḥayyā*, “wonder” (amazement, awe, stupor)¹⁵⁶⁰. They refer mostly to the highest stage of spiritual life – the spiritual stage, the contemplation in silence of the divine mystery of God, when the senses are suspended, as well as any type of movement. I will quote a fragment that supports this idea: “On account of these kinds of labour performed in wisdom, the saints are deemed worthy of ecstasy/ wonder (*ḥayyā*) caused by divine revelation”¹⁵⁶¹, which is exalted above fleshly thought”¹⁵⁶².

Isaac argues that this condition involves the intellect, the mind or thinking. For example, in what he calls mystical “overshadowing”¹⁵⁶³ of the Holy Spirit, the intellect (*ḥayyā*) “is sized and dilated in a sense of wonder (*ḥayyā*) in a kind of divine revelation”¹⁵⁶⁴. Wonder occurs as a consequence of the fact that divinity cannot be grasped by human’s natural faculties and requires the direct intervention of the Holy Spirit. One may read in the Third collection that “As often as the mind seeks to look on what is hidden but falls short of it because of its being concealed the mind (*ḥayyā*) may with these properties observe as in wonder (*ḥayyā*) that nature which cannot be comprehended naturally, whether by vision (*ḥayyā*), intellect (*ḥayyā*) or thought (*ḥayyā*)”¹⁵⁶⁵. This time, Isaac associates “wonder” with “mind”, “intellect” and “thought”. Other times the concept also appears referring to “thinking” too. The knowledge of truth is achieved in the mind’s state of wonder, as illustrated in the paragraph: “we call ‘truth’ the right reflection on God, which stems from Him, upon which someone stumbles in their mind/ thinking (*ḥayyā*), in a kind of state of wonder (*ḥayyā*) – at spiritual mysteries”¹⁵⁶⁶.

¹⁵⁵⁷ *ḥayyā ḥayyā*.

¹⁵⁵⁸ *ḥayyā ḥayyā ḥayyā ḥayyā ḥayyā*.

¹⁵⁵⁹ II, 3.3, 56.

¹⁵⁶⁰ Occasionally, Isaac uses *ḥayyā*, *ḥayyā* and *ḥayyā* without any distinction between them.

¹⁵⁶¹ *ḥayyā ḥayyā*.

¹⁵⁶² I, 80, p. 349 (B, 369).

¹⁵⁶³ I, 54, p. 261-262 (B, 390-391).

¹⁵⁶⁴ II, 16,5; II, 22,6; In II, 3,60.

¹⁵⁶⁵ III, 4,3.

¹⁵⁶⁶ II, 8,1.

The state of “wonder” is directly connected with prayer¹⁵⁶⁷ or meditation on the future things or God’s nature¹⁵⁶⁸, on the providence¹⁵⁶⁹ or God’s mercy¹⁵⁷⁰. It turns itself into spiritual contemplation when there is no prayer, no meditation, or any other kind of movement. This stage corresponds to what Isaac calls “spiritual man” state¹⁵⁷¹, “prisoner” of God’s grace¹⁵⁷² and love¹⁵⁷³.

“Amazement” (awe) (ܐܡܝܬܐ) follows the same path: involves the intellect¹⁵⁷⁴, the mind¹⁵⁷⁵, and thinking¹⁵⁷⁶; begins from prayer¹⁵⁷⁷ and meditation on God¹⁵⁷⁸, creation¹⁵⁷⁹, Economy¹⁵⁸⁰ and providence¹⁵⁸¹; yet, it is an action of the Holy Spirit¹⁵⁸² that makes the heart “prisoner”¹⁵⁸³ and silences all emotions. André Louf, as well as Serafim Seppälä, advocates a qualitative succession of the states described by the two terms discussed above. If “amazement” (ܐܡܝܬܐ) points to a perception that comes from meditation on the work of God, creation and providence, “wonder” (ܐܡܝܬܐ) highlights the primacy of the direct intervention of the Holy Spirit, as anticipation of the future reality, prepared by the former. And yet, this suggested difference is not clearly expressed in Isaac’s discourses¹⁵⁸⁴.

¹⁵⁶⁷ II, 35,1; I, 22.

¹⁵⁶⁸ II, 3.3,49.

¹⁵⁶⁹ II, 35,3.

¹⁵⁷⁰ III, 11,27.

¹⁵⁷¹ ܐܡܝܬܐ ܐܡܝܬܐ; II, 3.3,92.

¹⁵⁷² II, 1,32.

¹⁵⁷³ II, 20,20.

¹⁵⁷⁴ III, 2,27.

¹⁵⁷⁵ II, 3.2,10; 14,24.

¹⁵⁷⁶ II, 3.2,89; 4.66.

¹⁵⁷⁷ I, 3, p. 31 (B, 43).

¹⁵⁷⁸ II, 1,42; II, 3.1,86; III, 3,6.

¹⁵⁷⁹ II, 36,1.

¹⁵⁸⁰ II, 3.4,48; 21,13.

¹⁵⁸¹ II, 30,7; III, 12,20.

¹⁵⁸² II, 3.2,89.

¹⁵⁸³ II, 3.1,88; II, 3.4,48.

¹⁵⁸⁴ It seems that André Louf and Serafim Seppälä are the only scholars to support a qualitative difference between the two terms in Isaac’s writings. Louf advocates that the root „tmh” is connected with „torpor”, when the parts of the body become rigid and the gaze fixed; while the root „thr” is normally translated with “to marvel”, “to admire”. His conclusion shows that if the latter one is more common and normally generated by human efforts (reading, meditation, participation at liturgical office), the former one is the result of the direct intervention of the Spirit and anticipates the reality of the life to come. For details see: A. Louf, “*Temha – stupore e tahra – meraviglia negli scritti di Isacco di Ninive*”, *La grande stagione della mistica siro-orientale (VI-VII secolo)*, Centro Ambrosiano, 2009, p. 93-117 and S. Seppälä, *In Speechless Ecstasy*, p. 77-80; he shown that in the Old Testament occur nine different usages of „temha”: distraction of mind as a mental disease decreed by God; distraction of mind as a painful state resulting from one’s own awareness of a prevailing but inadmissible state of affairs; distraction as prevailing but inadmissible state of affairs; distraction as a symbol of annihilation decreed by God as a final and complete destruction, the closer nature of which is indeterminate; distraction as desolation of a city, by destructive divine action; distraction as horror: mental distraction caused by a concrete distraction; distraction as deficiency, inadequacy; distraction as deduction, reduction; and distraction as a verbal entity referring to distraction in one’s social relation. In addition, the passive participle or adjective occurs six times in the Peshitta Old Testament in four ways: distraction of mind as melancholy, anguish, desolation or as ecstatic mental state between revelations. In the New Testament the concepts of “temha” and

5.10 Knowledge and spiritual prayer

One can observe that up to now there were mostly three concepts analysed referring to the highest level of spiritual life – knowledge, divine vision/ contemplation and revelation. Isaac indicates a synonymy between them and adds a fourth one, already anticipated – spiritual prayer. We will quote a suggestive paragraph in this sense, from the First collection:

The holy Fathers are accustomed to designate all profitable emotions and all spiritual working by the name of prayer¹⁵⁸⁵ ... But sometimes they designate by spiritual prayer¹⁵⁸⁶ that which they sometimes call theoria¹⁵⁸⁷; and sometimes knowledge¹⁵⁸⁸; and sometimes revelations of intelligible things¹⁵⁸⁹. Doest thou see, how the Fathers change their designations of spiritual things? This is because accurate designations can only be established concerning earthly things¹⁵⁹⁰.

In fact, in his vision, these concepts are incapable to express the truth about the heavenly reality, as one speaks about two completely different realms. In the line of Pseudo Dionysius, Isaac asserts that there is not and cannot be a complete objective way of understanding mystical realities, as they are “exalted above all names and signs and forms and colours and habits and composite denominations”¹⁵⁹¹.

On the concept of spiritual prayer there were published two important studies – Paolo Bettio, *Prigionieri dello Spirito. Libertà creaturale ed eschaton in Isacco di Ninive e nelle sue fonti*¹⁵⁹², and Brouria Bitton Ashkelony, *The Limit of the Mind: Pure Prayer in Evagrius Ponticus and Isaac of Niniveh*¹⁵⁹³, that we will mostly use in this chapter. Both of them adopt the comparative methodology between Isaac’s vision and that of his sources, in particular Evagrius and John the Solitary.

“takra” are used to translate the Greek “ekstasis”. Serafim Seppälä lists six usages: distraction of the mind caused by sin or fear; drunkenness or its consequences; separation (in Christology); mystical experience connected with perfect prayer; mystical experience connected with visions; other usages (Adam, the prophets, Christ on the Cross). At Ephraim the Syrian he identifies six nuances: wonder, as something incomprehensible; wonder as something secret, hidden; wonder as something that causes a person to wonder in a general sense, a miraculous thing; wonder as a proper, emotionally pure and intellectually sound attitude to approaching the Divine; wonder as an emotional state in abiding in the nearness of God; and wonder as a mental state caused by God, as being the final perspective where the categories of approaching or abiding seem to be no longer relevant. For a historical view of the usage of the terms in the Bible and the Fathers of the Church see Serafim Seppälä, *In Speechless Ecstasy*, p. 331-341.

¹⁵⁸⁵ תַּהֲרָה.

¹⁵⁸⁶ תַּהֲרָה תַּהֲרָה.

¹⁵⁸⁷ תַּהֲרָה.

¹⁵⁸⁸ תַּהֲרָה.

¹⁵⁸⁹ תַּהֲרָה תַּהֲרָה תַּהֲרָה.

¹⁵⁹⁰ I, 22, p. 114 (B, 168-169).

¹⁵⁹¹ I, 22, p. 114 (B, 169).

¹⁵⁹² *Annali di Scienze Religiose*, 4 (1995), p. 345-363.

¹⁵⁹³ *Zeitschrift für Antikes Christentum* 15 (2011), p. 291-321.

Isaac argues that as it comes a moment when all psychic and noetic impulses cease there is a state beyond pure prayer described with the terms already analysed – “amazement”, “vision” and, finally, “spiritual prayer”:

As soon as the spirit has crossed the boundary¹⁵⁹⁹ of pure prayer and proceeded onwards, there is neither prayer, nor emotions, nor tears, nor authority, nor freedom, nor beseechings, nor desire, nor longing after any of those things which are hoped for in this world or in the world to be. Therefore there is no prayer beyond pure prayer and all its emotions and habits by their authority with freedom conduct the spirit thus far and there is struggle in it; but beyond this limit it passes into ecstasy¹⁶⁰⁰ and is no longer prayer. From here onwards the spirit desists from prayer; there is sight¹⁶⁰¹, but the spirit does not pray¹⁶⁰².

So, pure prayer is an intermediary state towards spiritual stage, when there are no impulses, sensations or other movements concerning anything, but an ineffable silence¹⁶⁰³. The mind experiences here another kind of knowledge, non-discursive, in a state of wonder¹⁶⁰⁴. The reflections on the life to come are replaced by the gazes at this reality that are qualitatively different. Isaac highlights this idea: “Spiritual insights which arise concerning matters of this world are quite different in their power from the luminous reflection on the things to come, for by gazing at such things the mind is changed into a state of wonder”¹⁶⁰⁵. For Isaac this means going out of oneself (or better, going in oneself – entasy) and out of this world and lack of mind awareness. In that time “the saints... do not pray, when the mind has been engulfed by the [divine] spirit, but they dwell in ecstasy¹⁶⁰⁶ in that delightful glory¹⁶⁰⁷, so the mind, when it has been made worthy of perceiving the future blessedness, will forget itself and all that is here, and it will not be moved any longer by the thought of anything”¹⁶⁰⁸. In the evolution of his argumentation he argues that, despite the fact this state is called “spiritual prayer”, from an epistemological point of view, one cannot speak properly about it as prayer and yet, it is called prayer as it is granted during prayer, when the mind of the saints is “snatched”¹⁶⁰⁹. In order to illustrate his vision, he makes appeal to some biblical events as Zacharias’ vision in the temple, the vision of Peter on the roof, the apparition during Cornelius’ prayer, the dialogue of God with

¹⁵⁹⁹ ἡμεῖς.

¹⁶⁰⁰ ἡμεῖς.

¹⁶⁰¹ ἡμεῖς.

¹⁶⁰² I, 22, p. 115 (B, 165-166).

¹⁶⁰³ II, 34, 2.

¹⁶⁰⁴ II, 30, 6.

¹⁶⁰⁵ II, 5, 8.

¹⁶⁰⁶ ἡμεῖς.

¹⁶⁰⁷ ἡμεῖς ἡμεῖς.

¹⁶⁰⁸ I, 22, p. 115 (B, 170).

¹⁶⁰⁹ See the radical ἡμεῖς (ἡμεῖς).

Joshua the son of Nun. And finally he establishes parallels with the sanctification of the gifts of bread and wine when the Spirit during Eucharistic Epiclesis descends upon them¹⁶¹⁰.

In the last part of the discourse in discussion, in order to argue his vision, Isaac quotes a short sentence of Evagrius that brought various theological disputes: “*Prayer namely is steadfastness of mind, which is terminated only by the light of the Holy Trinity through ecstasy*”¹⁶¹¹. Thou seest, how prayer is terminated when those insights which are born in the spirit from prayer, pass into ecstasy”¹⁶¹². Irénée Hausherr identified the quotation in Evagrius’ “Reflections 27”¹⁶¹³ and argued the mistranslation that occurred in Syriac, quoted by Isaac in his discourse (“Prayer is a state of the mind that arises under the influence of the unique light of the Holy Trinity”). The Syriac translator read *τεμνομένη*¹⁶¹⁴ – cut off – instead of *γνομένη* – occurring. His final conclusion was that Isaac’s whole system was generated by this mistranslation of Evagrius. While accepting the argumentation of Hausherr, Elie Khalifé-Hachem rightly shows that Isaac’s vision was not influenced only by this Evagrian sentence, and, in particular, on the basis of one single word, but the concept of “spiritual prayer” reflects his entire spiritual vision, influenced also by the perspective of John the Solitary¹⁶¹⁵. Robert Beulay, in the monograph dedicated to John Dalyatha, while underlining the distinction between active and passive prayer in Isaac’s discourses, he argues one may find that the terms indicated by Haussherr are less important than the “paradox accepted by Isaac, and could not indicate the transcendence of spiritual prayer which is not prayer vis-à-vis that of human”¹⁶¹⁶.

In an article mentioned above, Paolo Bettiolo, in the line of Khalifé-Hachem, traces the source of Isaac's vision in the perspective of John the Solitary, in particular in the distinction he makes between justice and perfection, on one side, and, on the other side, the hierarchy of the tripartite conducts – bodily, psychic and spiritual. In this frame, both Khalifé-Hachem and Bettiolo argue that for Isaac there are two conducts of the exterior man and the inner man and, in consequence, the spiritual stage goes beyond the natural possibility and it is going to be

¹⁶¹⁰ For details see my article: *The Liturgical Epiclesis as Image for Mystical Life in the Syriac Tradition. The Role of the Holy Spirit in Incarnation, Eucharist and Spiritual Prayer*, p. 226-239.

[illegible]

¹⁶¹² I, 22, p. 118 (B, 174).

¹⁶¹³ W. Frankenberg, *Evagrius Ponticus*, Berlin 1912, p. 454; *Reflections* 27 (*Skemmata*) in J. Muyldermans, "Evagriana: Nouveaux fragments grecs inédits, (Evagriana)", *Le Museon*, 44 (1931), p. 377; quoted in Greek in Irénée Hausherr, "Par-delà L'oraison pure grâce à une coquille", „Hésychasme et prière", OCA 176, Roma, 1966, p. 8-12 (here p. 12).

1614 *Kamaghu.*

¹⁶¹⁵ Cf. "La prière pure et la prière spirituelle selon Isaac de Ninivé", *Mémorial Mgr Gabriel Khouri-Sarkis*, Louvain, 1969, p. 157-173

¹⁶¹⁶ Robert Beulay, *Jean de Dalvatha*, p. 219.

indiscriminately about “true prayer”¹⁶²³, “spiritual prayer”¹⁶²⁴, “pure prayer”¹⁶²⁵, immaterial prayer and prayer without distraction¹⁶²⁶. Isaac is consequent with his clear separation between the discursive knowledge and the intuitive contemplation when he emphasizes that spiritual prayer is not acquired by any human effort, but it is a gift. This idea is suggested in the final paragraph of the discussed discourse:

What should be called? The fruit of pure prayer, which is engulfed in the spirit. The mind has ascended here above prayer. And, having found what is more excellent, it desists from prayer. And further there is no longer prayer, but the gaze in ecstasy¹⁶²⁷ at the unattainable things which do not belong to the world of mortals, and peace without knowledge of any earthly thing. This is the well-known ignorance¹⁶²⁸ concerning which Evagrius says¹⁶²⁹: Blessed is he who has reached, during prayer, unconsciousness¹⁶³⁰ which is not to be surpassed¹⁶³¹

There is one important observation to make from the paragraph above. Despite the fact that spiritual prayer is not the result of any ascetic effort, Isaac stresses that it comes, in the spirit of the synergetic eastern ascetic tradition, as a consequence of pure prayer. But to express the transcendent character of this state he equalises the spiritual prayer with “wonder” as well as “un-knowledge”. The two concepts pertain to two different principles of action – active (given by good noetic impulses) and passive (silence of the mind¹⁶³²). The first type corresponds to pure prayer, while the second to spiritual prayer and is given by the revelation of intellect¹⁶³³, out of any human struggle or the strength of the will¹⁶³⁴. This is also called “apperception of God”¹⁶³⁵, that occurs spontaneously and motionlessly, and the “wonderment of mind”¹⁶³⁶ free from all images, and the spiritual silence^{1637, 1638}.

Finally one can argue Isaac is not a new theorist on the doctrine of spiritual prayer, but more a re-interpreter of Evagrius’ perspective within his own Syriac tradition in an

¹⁶²³ Evagrius Ponticus, *The Praktikos, Chapters on Prayer*, Cistercian Studies Series 4, Kalamazoo, Michigan, 1981, 10, 55, 60, 64, 75, 80, 113 (1169b-c, 1177c, 1180b, 1180d, 1184b, 1184d, 1191d).

¹⁶²⁴ *Chapters on Prayer*, 28, 49, 62, 71, 101 (1173a, 1177b, 1180c, 1181d, 1189b).

¹⁶²⁵ *Chapters on Prayer*, 70, 72, 97 (1181c, 1181d, 1188d-1189a).

¹⁶²⁶ *Chapters on Prayer*, 17, 145 (1172a, 1197c).

¹⁶²⁷ ܠܬܝܠܥܝܬܐ ܕܠܝܬܐ.

¹⁶²⁸ ܠܬܝܠܥܝܬܐ.

¹⁶²⁹ KG 3.88 (S₁).

¹⁶³⁰ Literally un-knowledge: ܠܬܝܠܥܝܬܐ.

¹⁶³¹ I, 22, p. 118 (B, 175).

¹⁶³² ܠܬܝܠܥܝܬܐ.

¹⁶³³ ܠܬܝܠܥܝܬܐ; see also “the revelation of mind” (ܠܬܝܠܥܝܬܐ ܕܠܝܬܐ), I, 20, p. 109 (B, 161).

¹⁶³⁴ II, 15, 7.

¹⁶³⁵ ܠܬܝܠܥܝܬܐ ܕܠܝܬܐ. See also KG 4.48.

¹⁶³⁶ ܠܬܝܠܥܝܬܐ.

¹⁶³⁷ ܠܬܝܠܥܝܬܐ.

¹⁶³⁸ II, 15, 10-11.

experiential frame. The concept of spiritual prayer goes along with the other cognitive concepts analysed up to now, all of them expressing the object of spiritual divine knowledge, the very core of our research.

5.11 Conclusion

In summary, Isaac's cognitive mysticism reflects a "theanthropic" epistemology, perfectly manifested in Jesus Christ. This method presupposes an anthropological structure able to perceiving the presence of the divine, on one side, and on the other side, suggests a divine direct revelation that is, technically speaking, his Economy. Isaac's epistemology is not purely theological (by the means of grace), nor purely anthropological (according to human's nature), but reflects a collaboration between the two. In consequence, Christian life is pictured as a theanthropic asceticism, starting from the material level, continuing with the psychic level and aiming to the spiritual work at the noetic level. In fact, it presupposes natural human participates to the process in its wholness.

Secondly, the powers of the soul and their forms of manifestation suggest again the anthropological dimension of the cognitive process. Intellect, mind, thought and thinking involved in the process, on one side, picture the noetic linguistic heritage of Evagrius, while the addition of the heart, as the most important soul power that encompasses all the others powers and the very centre of the spiritual life, connects it to the Pseudo Macarian language. Finally, Isaac's methodology of describing the process of knowledge by contrasting worldly and heavenly (worldly and spiritual knowledge, knowledge and faith, knowledge and un-knowledge, knowledge and vision and knowledge and spiritual prayer) clearly reveals the presence of the Theodorian theory of the two ages.

The next chapter, in a conclusive manner, will deal with the dogmatic presuppositions around the conceptual expression of Isaac's epistemology.

6. The Dogmatic position on spiritual knowledge

In the last chapter of the thesis we will dwell on the rapport one can identify between spiritual knowledge as described and analysed up to now and the East Syriac theology. That is historically looking at how spiritual ecstatic experiences relate to the Dogmatic theology of the East Syriac Church of the 7-8th century.

The key term of the thesis is experiential knowledge, which, to Isaac, means an active presence of the divine. And here comes the theological question – can one speak about a real knowledge of God? Which is the *causa efficiens* of divine knowledge and what is its scope? Which is the content of divine knowledge? Is it possible to see God? And, finally, is there a contraposition between the theologians and the meta-theologians? These are the questions to be answered in this chapter.

6.1 The possibility of divine knowledge

We have emphasized above the basic principles of the divine epistemology – God’s revelation, on the one hand, and, on the other hand, human’s creational ability to have access to it. To express it differently, one can speak about what we technically call divine Economy, respectively, theological anthropology, that stand at the very base of Isaac’s gnoseology. Both of the principles are developed within the heritage of Theodore of Mopsuestia – God’s revelation observes a gradual development into two ages – before and after Incarnation – this event also representing the inaugural moment for the knowledge of the life to come, partially anticipated in the earthly reality. In the same line, salvation is a slow educational process, from the state of imperfection to perfection by the experience of opposites. Human was not able to know good by nature as God does, but by its opposite. From this perspective, God acts pedagogically by educating people through the experience of the opposite things, so as to freely receive his gifts and revelations. One can identify here the cognitive dimension of salvation.

God’s creation has no other sense than to be the first book (ܬܠܡܕ ܕܥܡܪܐ) given by God to the rational beings. All things were created to be the transparent medium for the divine revelation. And, on the other side, intelligible beings were created to know God. In particular, human’s ability to know God is due to the fact that he is created in God’s image. In developing his theological anthropology, Isaac makes a synthesis mainly between three great authors, representatives of different schools – Evagrius of Pontus, Theodore of Mopsuestia and John the Solitary.

The human being was created to be God's temple, the dwelling of the divinity. As the image of God, he was in potency immortal, as far as ontologically he would have remained close to his Creator. He was endowed with five spiritual powers so as "to become aware of and enjoy the delight of intelligence and the pleasure of the vast gifts of insights"¹⁶³⁹. On the basis of the divine image and, in consequence, of these five powers, the human being grows up constantly and comes closer to God in His knowledge, trying to achieve the ultimate goal – the likeness of God, actualised in what Isaac calls deification – that is becoming "gods by means of grace"¹⁶⁴⁰. This was the initial purpose – to bring the entire nature of rational beings to a unity and equality. But human has not achieved this state all of a sudden, because God wanted "to achieve (salvation) within a history that does not develop only gradually"¹⁶⁴¹. According to his theology, at the beginning of creation, the human being, even if he could be immortal, was not perfect, being still a child, though designed to reach maturity. He was not able to receive perfect knowledge without first being prepared for it¹⁶⁴². We are dealing here with a pedagogical vision of history, which assumes a linear trend without end. From this perspective, the world has a particularly important role, it is a school¹⁶⁴³ in which one can make progress and prepare for the world to come¹⁶⁴⁴.

The knowledge inaugurated by incarnation brings a broad perspective and this occurs especially in comparison to the knowledge available to previous generations of this event. Isaac clearly asserts the idea that incarnation represents a radical "new" epiphany of God. For him there is an obvious qualitative difference between the level of knowledge before and after incarnation: if before incarnation, one could hardly hear the divine voice, occasionally only those elected by divine calling, after incarnation, through divine grace, human is even able to "see" God, as shown above.

To synthetize, there are mainly three elements that stand at the very basis of the possibility of divine knowledge: the divine revelation, suggesting the primacy of God's initiative, then an anthropological structure that makes human able to attend to the divine knowledge and Christ's incarnation, that inaugurated the spiritual knowledge of the life to come.

¹⁶³⁹ II, 18.18. One can observe here the two directions – by way of heart and senses (Macarius) and at noetic level (Evagrius) – joined in a synthesis in Isaac's gnoseological perspective – "feeling" (شعور), the divine mysteries and the participation by "knowing" (معرفة) to God's revelation.

¹⁶⁴⁰ II, 3.1,62.

¹⁶⁴¹ André Louf, "L'homme dans l'histoire du salut selon Isaac le syrien", *Connaissance de Pères de L'Eglise*, 88 (2002), p. 49.

¹⁶⁴² II, 2,3.

¹⁶⁴³ صفة المدارس.

¹⁶⁴⁴ II, 3.3,71.

6.2 The cause of spiritual knowledge

One first aspect worth mentioning refers to the ambivalence Isaac pictures when describing his epistemology – the rational knowledge that deals with the content of knowing and questions its basis and premises, and the experiential knowledge, mystical by its nature, that goes beyond ordinary content and way of knowing and is qualitative, being connected with experiences that occur suddenly, since there are interpreted as being of divine origin.

Isaac admits two ways of knowing, discursive as well as intuitive, the latter one superior to the former. The former is more reflexive and constituted; it uses information, while the latter is immediate, internalized, personal and active, and is generated by inspiration and revelation.

We will recall the three presuppositions we have evoked at the beginning of the chapter dedicated to the process of knowledge itself, as it seems useful to us to draw some conclusions regarding the issues in discussion. Firstly, there is a transformative and progressive evolution in the process of knowing. That means a mystical experience, due to the external and inner purification and, especially, God's intervention, creates spiritual eyes, spiritual faculties, capable, in consequence, to spiritually see God's rationality in creation and finally attain what Isaac calls "true knowledge". It implies a kind of spiritualization or transfiguration. Then, a spiritual person is able to identify the mutuality and dependency between the external and the inner phenomena, as he achieves a unitary way of regarding the reality – as a totality. Here, the connection between the emotional and cognitive dimension of knowledge occurs. The cause of this transformation of vision is the hidden light, the divine grace. And lastly, one can identify in Isaac's discourses a deep connection between present and eschatological times. This presupposes knowledge always aims to foretasting the life to come. This in turns means a mystic does not search for spiritual experiences, but rather to enter a new reality and, in consequence, to transform his whole life.

For Isaac education or experience, physical, psychical or noetic exercises, are not able to generate spiritual knowledge, as it is something from without. By ascetic exercises the human being is able to achieve a state above passions, a state of physical mortification and the silence of thoughts, but not the peace, the joy, the warm and tranquillity that belong to the spiritual state. Spiritual experiences occur not as a result of investigation or voluntarily, but suddenly and spontaneously¹⁶⁴⁵, according to the divine intervention. Here comes the critique Isaac makes regarding the Messalians who claimed they are able to pray whenever they

¹⁶⁴⁵ See the story of a brother who was visited by grace in the very moment he wanted to leave his cell for idle things. So, he immediately came back. (I, 24, p. 120/ B, 178)

want¹⁶⁴⁶. We will quote a suggestive paragraph where Isaac points to the qualitative difference between the two types of knowledge

The degree of revelation is not the same as that a man deepens his emotions by the study of wisdoms and by intellectual labour so as to arrive at some understanding and contemplation of anything by mental investigation. For it is said: Revelation is silence of intellect. And by zealous efforts and human thoughts no one can imagine that he has found knowledge; this happens by spiritual power so that he to whom the revelation is imparted, at that time is not aware of any thought of his soul nor of those things which present themselves to his senses; neither does he use them nor is he acquainted with them¹⁶⁴⁷.

This excerpt clearly reveals the fundamental issue around Isaac's epistemological view – knowledge is not the effect of zealous effort (ascetical practice) or mental investigation (out of study and intellectual labour), but it is the result of divine revelation, an act of spiritual power. However, as Serafim Seppälä argues, it is difficult to grasp the actual identity of the cause itself in the theological discourses:

This can be seen as the result of two separate phenomena. On the one hand, the identity of the causa efficiens as the Christian God (Father, Son and Holy Spirit) is so self-evident that it does not need to be explained or even mentioned, and, on the other, the exact nature of God had been thoroughly examined in dogmatic theology, with all of its schismatic consequences, that the ascetic authors were in custom of avoiding dogmatic statements, both intentionally and unintentionally. Lack of speculation on Divine Being is connected with the humble ideals of Christian asceticism; monks are critical to their experiences and careful not to over explain them in general and, in particular, not to misinterpret God for their own experiences¹⁶⁴⁸.

In consequence, he identifies the ecumenical role the monastic writings have as “ironically, the ascetics’ surrender to orthodox doctrines happens to make the meta-theological reading more suitable for a non-Christian readership without orthodox subtexts”¹⁶⁴⁹.

In conclusion, the subject or the cause of the spiritual knowledge is the divine power, called either with the names of the Trinitarian persons, either with generic qualitative names as divine attributes, such as grace, light, love, mercy, glory that manifests in different forms, as we will evoke in the next subchapter, dedicated to the very content and the forms of the spiritual knowledge.

¹⁶⁴⁶ I, 22, p. 116 (B, 171).

¹⁶⁴⁷ I, 19, p. 105 (154-155).

¹⁶⁴⁸ Serafim Seppälä, *In Speechless Ecstasy*, p. 133.

¹⁶⁴⁹ *Ibidem*.

6.3 The content and the forms of spiritual knowledge

The content of the spiritual knowledge is difficult to be identified. Nevertheless, something can be intuited from the forms the process takes in its evolution. In my paper five forms are evoked, and yet not exhaustively – un-knowledge (holy ignorance), theoria (divine vision), revelation, wonder and spiritual prayer.

Regarding the concept of “un-knowledge”, Isaac develops it within the general frame of the two cognitive methodologies – worldly and spiritual or discursive and intuitive. There is a qualitative evolution in terms of the cognitive process commencing with the rational knowledge (so called “of the philosophers”), that presupposes all logical categories, and the spiritual knowledge (“of the saints”), that goes beyond these categories. Therefore Isaac considers that linguistically this latter type cannot be called “knowledge” anymore as it is achieved completely out of investigation or ascetic struggle. It is rather revelational and visionary. This is why, in the line of the apophatic theology, Isaac calls it “un-knowledge”. He describes the concept as “the eternal thought¹⁶⁵⁰ of God unattainable”¹⁶⁵¹ or, in reference to divine vision, “the more the righteous advance to the vision of Him, the more they see an *enigmatic sight*¹⁶⁵², as an image shown in the mirror”¹⁶⁵³. One cannot equalize these expressions with agnosticism. Their use, in fact, aims to highlight the diverse methodology of spiritual knowledge. This is why he asserts: “Blessed is he who has reached during prayer un-knowledge¹⁶⁵⁴ which is not to be surpassed”¹⁶⁵⁵. Finally, using the language of Gregory of Nyssa and Pseudo Dionysius, he states: “And though he has penetrated into the mysteries of all spiritual kinds (of beings) and possesses great wisdom concerning all the creatures, he knows with perfect certainty that he *knows nothing*”¹⁶⁵⁶.

The second concept, “theoria” we have underlined has more stages – the contemplation of nature, the contemplation of Scripture, the contemplation of corporeals and incorporeals. But what is more important for our discussion refers to the last level – the theoria of God. Despite the fact that verbal expressions regarding this issue are scarce, one can identify some key terms that seem conclusive to us. He describes the concept as “vision of the spirit”¹⁶⁵⁷, expression that reveals the topos where it occurs – the spirit. Then theoria is “non

¹⁶⁵⁰ רעיון עולמי; 1 Corinthians 2:16.

¹⁶⁵¹ I, 26, p. 131 (B, 193).

¹⁶⁵² ראיית חסד וחסד.

¹⁶⁵³ I, 45, p. 217 (B, 324).

¹⁶⁵⁴ ראיית חסד.

¹⁶⁵⁵ KG III. 88; I, 22, p. 118 (B, 175).

¹⁶⁵⁶ ראיית חסד וחסד; I, 82, p. 387 (B, 579).

¹⁶⁵⁷ ראיית חסד וחסד “spiritual sight” (Wensinck); I, 35, p. 175 (B, 260).

apperceptible mental revelation”¹⁶⁵⁸. This time Isaac indicates the instrument – the mind (the noetic faculty) – and, by the attribute “non apperceptible”, he indicates the level – it occurs beyond the senses. Finally, he also indicates the object – “the *divine mysteries*¹⁶⁵⁹ hidden in the things spoken”¹⁶⁶⁰.

The third concept, “revelation”, has an ambivalent character –it pertains to the reality of the future world, on the one hand, and, on the other hand, it envisages the divine nature itself. As in the case of the previous concept, its first level pertains to the senses. We remember that Isaac lists six types of revelation, pertaining to senses, but also to the noetic level (by rapture of the thought¹⁶⁶¹ and that in an intellectual way, through intellection¹⁶⁶²). The last thing to be said regarding the object of revelation refers to the separation Isaac makes between the revelation by the means of images, for those who “of simple understanding and of small insights of the truth”¹⁶⁶³, and revelations without images, by intelligible apperception¹⁶⁶⁴, referring to the very nature of God. Isaac considers the latter one the highest form of understanding, the perfection of knowledge. We emphasize that the object is ambivalent – firstly, the insights in the truth of God’s Economy, in the lower stages, and insights regarding the very existence of God, in the highest state, pictured by Isaac with the terms “intuition”, “good rendering”¹⁶⁶⁵. This is why, he argues, it is more natural to call it “overshadowing” than “knowledge”, revealing the actor of the operation – the Holy Spirit.

“Wonder/ stupor” is defined as contemplation in silence of the divine mystery of God, as a consequence of the fact that divinity cannot be grasped by human’s natural faculties and it requires the direct intervention of the Holy Spirit. Isaac always associates this work with the noetic faculty (intellect, mind and thought) during the spiritual stage. Regarding the object, it is always the future reality, as for that one needs to be elevated above natural knowledge¹⁶⁶⁶. It does not have the pretension to achieve the knowledge of the essence, but to achieve some insights regarding its providence vis-à-vis creation¹⁶⁶⁷ and especially his charity for the sinners¹⁶⁶⁸. Finally, it pertains to spiritual knowledge and spiritual conduct.

¹⁶⁵⁸ *לְהַבִּיחַ לְעַלְיוֹתָא דְּלִיבָא*; Literally – “of the intellect”, I, 20, p. 109 (B, 161).

¹⁶⁵⁹ *לְהַבִּיחַ לְעַלְיוֹתָא דְּלִיבָא*.

¹⁶⁶⁰ I, II, p. 12 (B, 17).

¹⁶⁶¹ *לְהַבִּיחַ לְעַלְיוֹתָא דְּלִיבָא*.

¹⁶⁶² *לְהַבִּיחַ לְעַלְיוֹתָא דְּלִיבָא*.

¹⁶⁶³ *לְהַבִּיחַ לְעַלְיוֹתָא דְּלִיבָא*.

¹⁶⁶⁴ *לְהַבִּיחַ לְעַלְיוֹתָא דְּלִיבָא*.

¹⁶⁶⁵ *לְהַבִּיחַ לְעַלְיוֹתָא דְּלִיבָא*.

¹⁶⁶⁶ II, 3.3, 49.

¹⁶⁶⁷ II, 35,3.

¹⁶⁶⁸ III, 11, 27.

The last concept, “spiritual prayer”, comes as the highest form of spiritual experience and, in particular, of spiritual knowledge. It is an ecstatic experience describing the state after pure prayer, an ultimate mode of being that has no more struggles, emotions, yearnings, intentions. It is still called prayer as it originates in the “pure prayer”, but does not reflect the language and the action specific to what one normally calls prayer. Isaac seems to develop a technical term to define the state of spiritual knowledge. Despite that, he prefers to call it “the child of pure prayer”¹⁶⁶⁹, so as to avoid a terminological misunderstanding. The object of spiritual prayer is the vision of the light of the Holy Trinity in wonder¹⁶⁷⁰.

6.4 The scope of spiritual knowledge

Regarding the scope, we will adopt the tripartite scheme proposed by Serafim Seppälä that seems consistent to us – from an ontological, eschatological and a social perspective, and yet applied in a different frame: ontological, referring to human transformation in the frame of the anthropological-theological movement, from image to likeness; eschatological, as the spiritual knowledge envisages not a personal perfection, but an incorporation in a meta-theological reality; and social, identifying the social topos of the hermit in the concrete world and, in consequence, establishing a hierarchy of ascetical exercises.

The finality of the process of knowledge from an ontological point of view refers to the human inner transformation during the spiritual experience. Seppälä pictures the biblical paradox – being in the course and in the same time reaching the scope – as a “spiritual transformation within the process of reaching a higher level in spiritual growth... and as a manifestation of the fact that the higher level has already been attained”¹⁶⁷¹. And yet, one could say there is no end of experience but more new stages in the spiritual itinerary. Here one can identify the dynamism of the theological anthropology that points to the difference between the “image” and the “likeness” in the sense of the transformation.

It seems to us there are mainly three terms that describe the human’s transformation, belonging to the mystical realm. It is about “unification”, “mingling” and “theosis”, in a qualitative succession.

It would be useful, regarding the “unification”, to mention the idea of one entity present in Isaac’s discourses, achieved by putting together the intelligible¹⁶⁷² and the sensible

¹⁶⁶⁹ *ἡ ἀληθινή προσευχή*, I, 22, p. 118 (B, 175).

¹⁶⁷⁰ *ἡ ἀληθινή προσευχή*, I, 22, p. 118 (B, 175).

¹⁶⁷¹ *In Speechless Ecstasy*, p. 140.

¹⁶⁷² *ἡ ἀληθινή*.

realities¹⁶⁷³ with God's divinity¹⁶⁷⁴. Analysing from an East Syriac Christological perspective, this would be a courageous expression of the unity of all in Christ. We will quote again a short fragment where Isaac describes the process of unification achieved in Christ's incarnation and fulfilled in the eschatological times:

One may know the true love of God for creation from this that after He had finished its structure in all its parts, He brought it altogether into one unity¹⁶⁷⁵; sensible realities and spiritual ones¹⁶⁷⁶ into one bond and He joined it to His divinity¹⁶⁷⁷ and He raised it above all the heavens and set it on an everlasting throne and made it 'God' over all... "The union of Christ in the divinity¹⁶⁷⁸ has indicated to us the mystery of the unity of all in Christ¹⁶⁷⁹." This is the mystery: that all creation by means of one, has been brought near to God in a mystery¹⁶⁸⁰. Then it is transmitted to all. Thus all is united in Him¹⁶⁸¹ as the members in a body; He however is the head of all. This action was performed for all of creation. There will, indeed, be a time when no part will fall short of the whole^{1682 1683}.

We will quote other two fragments where Isaac goes a step further into the personal realm, describing the spiritual transformation human suffers, using the term in discussion: "our soul becomes the image of the godhead through unification¹⁶⁸⁴ with the incomprehensible and radiant in the rays¹⁶⁸⁵ of the sublime, by those impulses which are not for the eyes"¹⁶⁸⁶. Here Isaac argues an intimacy with God achieved in the unification by the means of divine light, theme present in our thesis many times. The transformation occurs not independently, but within the paradigm God-human. In another place, quoting Evagrius, Isaac speaks about mind's "union" with God as a result of ascetic struggle: "this brings our mind near to union with God^{1687,1688}.

¹⁶⁷³ ܐܠܗܐ ܕܥܡܐ.

¹⁶⁷⁴ ܐܠܗܐ ܕܡܠܟܐ.

¹⁶⁷⁵ ܐܠܗܐ ܕܡܠܟܐ.

¹⁶⁷⁶ Spiritual realities (ܐܠܗܐ ܕܥܡܐ); Isaac's usage may reflect Evagrius and Ps.Dionysius. See Brock, *Discerning the Evagrian*, p. 63.

¹⁶⁷⁷ ܐܠܗܐ ܕܡܠܟܐ. For the unity of creation and God in one entity see also II, 3.3,81, II, 3.2,19; on becoming gods II, 3.1,62, II,3.3,70, III, 3,15, 38, III,7,29.

¹⁶⁷⁸ ܐܠܗܐ ܕܡܠܟܐ ܕܥܡܐ ܕܡܠܟܐ; cf Evagrius, J. Muyltermans (ed.), *Evagriana Syriaca* (Louvain, 1952), *Admonitio paraenetica*; Paraenesis; La foi de Mar Évagre; Les justes et les parfaits, 7-8.

¹⁶⁷⁹ ܐܠܗܐ ܕܡܠܟܐ ܕܥܡܐ ܕܡܠܟܐ.

¹⁶⁸⁰ ܐܠܗܐ ܕܡܠܟܐ ܕܥܡܐ ܕܡܠܟܐ ܕܥܡܐ ܕܡܠܟܐ.

¹⁶⁸¹ ܐܠܗܐ.

¹⁶⁸² Here Isaac expresses the idea of the final recapitulation, while quoting either Evagrius, or Theodore of Mopsuestia or Diodore of Tarsus, which describe the highest gnoseological level. See also III, 6, 18, 62; II, 3.1,10 (quoting Evagrius), 19 (quoting Theodore), 61, 68, 91-91; II, 3.3,77, 81-82; and especially II, 38-41.

¹⁶⁸³ III, 5,3,10.

¹⁶⁸⁴ ܐܠܗܐ ܕܡܠܟܐ.

¹⁶⁸⁵ ܐܠܗܐ – light.

¹⁶⁸⁶ I, 22, p. 115 (B, 169).

¹⁶⁸⁷ ܐܠܗܐ ܕܡܠܟܐ ܕܥܡܐ ܕܡܠܟܐ.

¹⁶⁸⁸ I, 65, p. 310 (B, 462).

The second concept – “mingling” – seems to have a deeper connotation. We recall two significant fragments where Isaac deals with it: “The world has become mingled with God and creation and Creator have become one”¹⁶⁸⁹. The other excerpt is used in the same context and gives no evidence of theological speculation on the ontological meaning of the concept. It appears in the title of the 35th discourse of the Second collection and refers to the “ministry of mind”, the sum of the entire ascetic way of life that means entering into “a perfect mingling with God”¹⁶⁹⁰. As these concepts seem not to have been in any way problematic in the Syriac milieu, Seppälä argues they were generally understood as a symbolic language with biblical roots in the theology of Paul¹⁶⁹¹.

The last concept, “theosis”¹⁶⁹², leads to the idea of human’s profound unification with God and, in consequence, the divine attributes, by appropriation, are associated to human too. Isaac does not use it very often and yet one can find it in a triple sense – symbolical, theological, as well as mystical. So as to illustrate the metaphorical use we will give two examples from the First collection: the practice of ascetic life leads humans to become “a god on earth”¹⁶⁹³; or, in the adjectival form, the same concept is present: a spiritual man is called “divine”¹⁶⁹⁴. But, occasionally, one can also find the concept in a theological form. In the Third collection Isaac’s rhetorically asks: And what way of life did it offer in exchange for becoming ‘God’¹⁶⁹⁵? ... What position could be greater than that of divinity? And behold: creation has become ‘God’¹⁶⁹⁶”¹⁶⁹⁷. Thirdly, Isaac speaks about becoming ‘gods’ from a mystical perspective. This time in the Second collection one may find this idea expressed within the eschatological expression of the final unity: in the life to come “we all we will become ‘gods’ by the grace of our Creator”¹⁶⁹⁸.

¹⁶⁸⁹ ܡܠܟܐ ܕܥܡܪܐ ܕܡܠܟܐ ܕܡܠܟܐ ܕܡܠܟܐ ܕܡܠܟܐ ܕܡܠܟܐ ; II, 5,18.

¹⁶⁹⁰ ܡܠܟܐ ܕܥܡܪܐ ܕܡܠܟܐ ܕܡܠܟܐ ܕܡܠܟܐ ܕܡܠܟܐ ; II, 35, title.

¹⁶⁹¹ S. Seppälä, *In Speechless Ecstasy*, p. 140.

¹⁶⁹² In the Syriac terminology one may find the concept of “theosis”, but it is used very rarely in this form (ܡܠܟܐ ܕܥܡܪܐ). For details see S. Seppälä, *In Speechless Ecstasy*, p. 144-145.

¹⁶⁹³ ܡܠܟܐ ܕܥܡܪܐ ܕܡܠܟܐ ܕܡܠܟܐ ܕܡܠܟܐ ܕܡܠܟܐ ; I, 6, p. 64 (B, 95).

¹⁶⁹⁴ ܡܠܟܐ ; I, 13, p. 84-85 (B, 124-125).

¹⁶⁹⁵ ܡܠܟܐ ܕܥܡܪܐ.

¹⁶⁹⁶ ܡܠܟܐ ܕܥܡܪܐ ܕܡܠܟܐ ܕܡܠܟܐ.

¹⁶⁹⁷ III, 5, 4-5; On divinization in the Syriac tradition, see Russell, *The Doctrine of Deification in the Greek Patristic Tradition*, Oxford, University Press, 2004, Appendix I; See also the comments indicating the concept of *theosis* already in Ephrem, seemingly independent of Hellenic influence: “He gave us divinity, we gave Him humanity (E. Beck, *Hymns on Faith*, ed. and transl. E. Beck, CSCO 154-155/ 73-74); See S. Brock (ed.), *The Paradise Hymns*, New York: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1990, p. 73-74 and *Luminous Eye*, Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1992, p. 148-54. See also Vethanath, “St. Ephrem’s Understanding of Church as New Paradise and *Locus* of Divinization,” *ChrOr* XXIX (2008), 1, p. 12-22 and Buchan, “Paradise as the Landscape of Salvation in Ephrem the Syrian,” in *Partakers of the Divine Nature*, ed. M.J. Christensen and J.A. Wittung, Madison NJ: Fairleigh Dickenson University Press, 2007, p.146-59.

¹⁶⁹⁸ ܡܠܟܐ ܕܥܡܪܐ ܕܡܠܟܐ ܕܡܠܟܐ ܕܡܠܟܐ ܕܡܠܟܐ ; II, 3.1,62.

The eschatological dimension of knowledge comes naturally as a consequence of the ontological one “by adopting it on the chronological axis, connecting the experience with salvation history”¹⁶⁹⁹. In this frame, spiritual knowledge is interpreted as a foretaste of the future state that is life after resurrection: “it will direct itself towards the glory of the world to be, the hope¹⁷⁰⁰ preserved for the righteous, life in spiritual emotion wholly originating in God... He has prepared a different world which is so amazing, into which He shall introduce all rational beings and keep them without variance in life without end”¹⁷⁰¹.

In a symbolic way, as already mentioned above, Isaac speaks about three periods – of the six days, the seventh and the eight day of the life to come, partially experienced in the spiritual knowledge: “The eight day is departing from the grave. Those who are worthy receive the mysteries of the Sunday in a symbol already in this world, but do not receive the day itself as long as they are in the body... God has given us a taste of a mysterious indication of all things, but he has not decreed that we should walk here in contact with the real truth”¹⁷⁰².

One can identify here the Theodorian theory on the two ages and yet, Isaac underlines the strong connection between them from a spiritual perspective. This is clearly expressed when he speaks about the symbolical resurrection of the body¹⁷⁰³ that occurs in the “eight day”, entirely free of worldly thoughts or psychological movements, and even memories of the past. He argues that “the symbolical resurrection of the body is when it rises from all the sin to which it was attached in (its) activity and applies itself to the excellent practice of service¹⁷⁰⁴ to God”¹⁷⁰⁵. This is the interpretation Isaac gives to the concept present in Colossians 2:12 and 3:1 and Ephesians 2:6. In the Third collection, Isaac touches again the concept and associates it to the noetic level. Here the symbolical resurrection is the new knowledge of God and the future reality Christ gives to the people by the means of faith in the renewal of the divine mysteries accessible to those enlightened. He asserts:

¹⁶⁹⁹ S. Seppälä, *In Speechless Ecstasy*, p. 145.

¹⁷⁰⁰ The theology of hope has its roots in the writings of Theodore of Mopsuestia and John the Solitary; see Werner Strothman, *Johannes von Apamea*, p. 74, 80; Arthur Vööbus, *History of Asceticism in the Syrian Orient: a Contribution to the History of Culture in the Near East*, 3, CSCO 500/81, p. 104; Bruce Bradley, “Jean le Solitaire”, *Dictionnaire de Spiritualité* VIII, col. 766; Irinée Hausherr, *Etudes de spiritualité orientale*, OCA 183, 1969, p. 216; Hilarion Alfeyev, *The Spiritual World of Isaac the Syrian*, p. 274-297; Sabino Chialà, *Dall'asceti eremitica*, p. 263-278; Waclaw Hryniewicz, “Das Geheimnis der Gehenna in den Meditationen des hl. Isaak des Syrers”, *Ostkirchliche Studien*, 53 (2004), p. 28-44, adapted by Isaac to his ascetic lifestyle.

¹⁷⁰¹ I, 35, p. 171 (B, 254-255).

¹⁷⁰² II, 28, p. 202-203.

¹⁷⁰³ ܕܝܠܕܝܬܐ ܕܥܝܪܐܢܐ.

¹⁷⁰⁴ ܕܝܠܕܝܬܐ ܕܥܝܪܐܢܐ; see also II, 3.3.54. Compare with Evagrius' identic expression in *Capita Cognoscitiva*, in J. Muyldermans, *Evagre le Pontique: les Capita Cognoscitiva dans les versions syriaques et arméniennes*, p. 73-106, here 90.

¹⁷⁰⁵ II, 8, 10.

We have risen by faith in the future realities¹⁷⁰⁶; we have risen in the knowledge concerning the divine Nature¹⁷⁰⁷, in the perception of His Essence¹⁷⁰⁸, in the glory of His greatness¹⁷⁰⁹, in the height of His Nature¹⁷¹⁰, in the hope for the good things kept for us, in the knowledge of the mysteries of the new world¹⁷¹¹, in faith in the marvelous transformations which is prepared for creation¹⁷¹².

One can observe here the occurrence of the same language used to describe the cognitive process – firstly the object: future realities, described as the knowledge concerning the divine Nature. The term used here (knowledge) is part of the noetic language in the line of Evagrius, but one can identify, in the following lines, its description using a language proper to sensorial dimension of knowledge – experience (perception, feeling) of the divine Essence. And yet, not the Essence as such, but the divine glory, which is of the Essence. From a theological point of view, one can argue Isaac is cautious in expressing the possibility of knowledge in the earthly life as an anticipatory event of the future knowledge. Knowledge is real and yet not complete. It depends on faith and is inaugurated in the baptism. We remember the paragraph quoted above, from the same discourse, where Isaac argues the “true resurrection”¹⁷¹³ occurs by means of knowledge in “an assured faith and hope”¹⁷¹⁴ at the noetic level by “the renewal of the mind”¹⁷¹⁵. The methodology involved here is what he paradoxically calls “knowledge of faith”¹⁷¹⁶ of the marvelous Economy of Christ¹⁷¹⁷. Despite the fact Isaac employs faith as a means of knowledge, this is not simply a symbolical expression of the life to come, but it deeply reflects the final resurrection in the future world described as a state when “the mind has been engulfed by the Spirit... (one dwells) in wonder¹⁷¹⁸ in that delightful glory^{1719,1720}.

¹⁷⁰⁶ ἡμεῖς ἡμεῖς.

¹⁷⁰⁷ ἡμεῖς ἡμεῖς ἡμεῖς ἡμεῖς.

¹⁷⁰⁸ ἡμεῖς ἡμεῖς ἡμεῖς ἡμεῖς.

¹⁷⁰⁹ ἡμεῖς ἡμεῖς ἡμεῖς ἡμεῖς.

¹⁷¹⁰ ἡμεῖς ἡμεῖς.

¹⁷¹¹ ἡμεῖς ἡμεῖς ἡμεῖς ἡμεῖς.

¹⁷¹² III, 11, 2. See also I, p. 87, 172, 251, 316 (B, 127, 256, 374, 471); II, 5,1, 6,7; II, 8, 16; II, 10,19; II, 3.1,90; II, 2,2,19; II, 3.3, 21,82; II, 3.4,46,59,61,78.

¹⁷¹³ ἡμεῖς ἡμεῖς.

¹⁷¹⁴ ἡμεῖς ἡμεῖς ἡμεῖς ἡμεῖς.

¹⁷¹⁵ ἡμεῖς ἡμεῖς.

¹⁷¹⁶ ἡμεῖς ἡμεῖς ἡμεῖς ἡμεῖς; See the contraposition between knowledge and faith, when the latter one is synonym with experience: I, 51, p. 252 (B, 376); see also the presence of the apophatic theology in the line of Pseudo Dionysius or Gregory of Nyssa – *the thick darkness of the knowledge of faith*.

¹⁷¹⁷ III, 11, 31.

¹⁷¹⁸ ἡμεῖς.

¹⁷¹⁹ We remember that Isaac describes the eschatological epistemology as divine vision in the image of the wedding (Matthew 22): the banquet – the sight of spiritual knowledge, the food – the divine mysteries, the garment of the banquet – the mantle of purity, the filthy clothes – the lustful impulse, the outer darkness – the state of ignorance, the Sheol, the state which lacks the divine light, outside any divine knowledge, the place of

The theme of direct knowledge and equality is referential for Isaac's eschatological epistemology. In the future world all hierarchies will be abolished as all beings will be in direct contact with God¹⁷²¹. There will not be any mediation by means of angels or humans¹⁷²². This idea seems to be an opposition to Dionysius' hierarchical theology. And yet, the "quality" of the knowledge depends on the measure of one's excellence and worthiness. Isaac interprets John 14:2 – "many mansions" in a gnoseological key that presupposes a qualitative hierarchy that does not affect the relationship between people as during earthly life. The revelation is one, but it depends on the visual power of every person:

The many mansions in the house of the Father denote the spiritual degrees¹⁷²³ of the inhabitants of that place. This means: the different gifts and the spiritual ranks in which they rejoice spiritually, and the variety of the classes of gifts. It is not to be understood in such a manner, that every Person has really his defined portion in the various local habitations, so that [these differences] manifest themselves openly in the variety of particular mansions appointed for every one; but they are to be compared with the personal advantage every one of us obtains by the personal yet common use of this apperceptible sun in accordance with the purity of his visual power... The high degree of his neighbor's rank is not seen by him who is inferior, namely not as if it arose from the many gifts of his neighbor and from the scarcity of his own gifts, so that it should be to him a cause of grief and spiritual torment!... Every one rejoices within himself at the gift he has been deemed worthy of, and at the height of his rank. But the outward aspect of them all is one; and the place is one¹⁷²⁴.

Finally, Isaac's eschatological epistemology is based on the divine love. One can remember that there are two powers of the soul that accompany the final resurrection – simple rationality and the natural desire. If the first one refers to the process of knowledge, the second one points to the experience, mainly the experience of the divine love. The doctrine of divine love stands at the very basis of Isaac's theology. We will quote a paragraph where the bishop of Niniveh expresses at large this idea:

In love He did bring the world into existence; in love does He guide it during this its temporal existence; in love is He going to bring it to that wondrous transformed state, and in love the world will be swallowed up in the great mystery of Him who has

the bequest – the pure heart, where the heavenly light is revealed and experienced; I, 77, p. 350-351 (B, 522-523).

¹⁷²⁰ I, 22, p. 115 (B, 170).

¹⁷²¹ Patrick Hagman argues that at this point Isaac reinterprets Evagrius' idea, making a difference between the natural and the theological contemplation, contemplation of beings and the contemplation of God. In the first state one can speak about degrees, while the contemplation of the Trinity is absolute (KG IV.51; V.63). Hagman argues that Evagrius is speaking about a single mystic in a particular experience, while Isaac enlarges the topic to the relationship between all reasonable beings. In the life to come all will be equal in the contemplation of God and, in consequence, all perfect (See Patrick Hagman, *The asceticism of Isaac of Niniveh*, p. 208-209).

¹⁷²² I, 27, p. 135-136 (B, 201).

¹⁷²³ *درجات المعرفة*; literally – noetic levels.

¹⁷²⁴ I, 6, p. 58-59 (B, 86-87).

*performed all these things; in love will the whole course of the governance of creation be finally comprised. And since in the New World the Creator's love rules over all rational nature, the ecstasy at His mysteries that will be revealed (then) will captivate to itself the intellect of all rational beings whom he has created so that they might have delight in Him, whether they be evil or whether they be just*¹⁷²⁵.

From this perspective, the paradise is described as participation in the love of God – the tree of life and the heavenly bread¹⁷²⁶, while the torment of Gehenna represents the inability of the human being to participate in the same divine love¹⁷²⁷. The final state is described with optimism in the line of Apostle Paul's eschatology as a perfect transfiguration of the whole creation when God will be "all in all" (1 Corinthians 15:28)¹⁷²⁸. In fact, the definition of God he repeats in his discourses is described in these terms: "From very eternity, God is one and the same in what belongs to him by nature: 'there exists with him a single love and compassion which is spread out over all creation, a love which is without alteration, timeless and everlasting'"¹⁷²⁹.

The social scope of spiritual experience is given as a direct consequence of the mystical experience of God as perfect love. Despite the importance Isaac gives to solitude, paradoxically achieving the divine love causes a deep love and a merciful attitude towards people. We will quote a short fragment where Isaac suggestively deals with this issue: "Do you want to acquire the love of your fellow-man, according to the commandment of the Gospel, within yourself? Withdraw from him. Then the flame of love will burn in you and you will be eager to meet and see him as (if he was) a vision of the angel of light"¹⁷³⁰. In other words, he asserts that "the key of divine gifts unto the heart is given through the love of the

¹⁷²⁵ II, 38, 2.

¹⁷²⁶ I, 43, p. 211 (B, 316-317).

¹⁷²⁷ I, 27, p. 135-136 (B, 201-202).

¹⁷²⁸ For the idea of apocatastasis see Paolo Bettolo, "Avec la charité comme but: Dieu et création dans la méditation d'Isaac de Ninive", *Irenikon*, 63 (1990), p. 323-345; Paolo Bettolo, "Misericordia e giustizia nella meditazione di un solitario siro-orientale del VII secolo, Isacco di Ninive", L. Ceradini Leonori (ed.), *Secondo Giustizia. Atti del II I colloquio organizzato dal gruppo Oggi la Parola, Camaldoli*, Sotto il Monte, Servitium, 2005, p. 47-63; Waclaw Hryniewicz, "Das Geheimnis der Gehenna in den Meditationen des hl. Isaak des Syrers", in *Ostkirchliche Studien*, 53 (2004), p. 28-44; Waclaw Hryniewicz, "Hoffnung der Heiligen. Das Zeugnis Isaac Syrsers", *Ostkirchliche Studien*, 45 (1996), p. 21-41; Waclaw Hryniewicz, "Universalism of salvation: St. Isaac the Syrian", H. Gerny, H. Rein, M. Weyermann (ed.), *Die Wurzel alle Theologe: sentire cum Ecclesia. Festschrift U. von Arx*, Bern, 2003, p. 139-150; Nestor Kavvadas, "On the Relation between the Eschatological Doctrine of Isaac of Niniveh and Theodore of Mopsuestia", *Studia Patristica*, 45 (2010), p. 245-250; Rey, Dosithée, " 'Nombreux sont mes péchés, Seigneur, mais ta miséricorde est plus grande que mes péchés'. La doctrine de la géhenne chez Isaac le Syrien", *Liens de moniales*, 147 (2001), p. 1-22; Ilaria L.E. Ramelli, "Isacco di Ninive teologo della carità divina e fonte sulla perduta escatologia antiochena", *La teologia dal V all'VIII secolo fra sviluppo e crisi*, XLI Incontro di Studiosi dell'Antichità Cristiana (Roma, 9 - 11 maggio 2013), Roma, Institutum Patristicum Augustinianum, 2014, p. 749-768p. 749-768; Valentin Vesa, "Monahul și solidaritatea universală: Sfântul Isaac Sirul și viziunea sa optimistă asupra vieții viitoare", *Altarul Reîntregirii*, 16 (2011), 2, p. 119-147.

¹⁷²⁹ II, 40, 1.

¹⁷³⁰ I, 41, p. 208 (B, 313); see also II, 10, 41.

neighbour”¹⁷³¹. As Serafim Sepälä argues, these two complementary ideas create a paradoxical circle, typical for eastern spirituality: “one needs spiritual experience in order to be able to love, yet one must love in order to be able to receive the experience. We might say that this circle is closed in terms of logic and self-supporting in terms of vitality”¹⁷³².

For an ascetic an essential element concerning these issues is the transformation of the world-view, by means of ascetic practices – fasting, prostrations, silence and prayer. It is an itinerary from a mundane world-view to a spiritual word-view. One can identify here again the doctrine of the two ages (this world – next world). In fact, the entire ascetic endeavour refers to the passage from the first state to the latter one already during earthly life. Technically he calls that “living the life of the angels”. For that, Isaac points to an obligatory retire into the personal desert, outside the world. Despite this fact, at one first view, one might think the ascetic struggle is directed to a personal benefit, from a spiritual perspective they come back to the community – the communication of the heavenly world to society (spiritual world-view). One speaks here about a specific type of communication, out of close contact. Consequently, the asceticism takes two dimensions – transformation and communication. It has a political connotation – on one side, it is a revolt regarding the society, but, yet, on the other hand, it is also constructive regarding the spiritual transformation of the world. In this way, the ascetic’s life becomes an icon of the life to come, getting a symbolical value. And finally, it transforms itself into theology. In synthesis, the living of a monastic achieves divine characteristic, specifically by the encompassing of the whole world in his personal life. This world-view is technically called universal solidarity. We will quote a final fragment where Isaac describes his ascetical-social and, finally, his theological program:

*What is a merciful heart? ... The burning of the heart unto the whole creation, man, fowls and beasts, demons and whatever exists; so that by the recollection and the sight of them the eyes shed tears on account of the force of mercy which moves the heart by great compassion. Then the heart becomes weak and it is not able to bear hearing or examining injury or any insignificant suffering of anything in the creation. And therefore even in behalf of the irrational beings and the enemies of truth and even in behalf of those who do harm to it, at all times he offers prayers with tears that they may be guarded and strengthened; even in behalf of the kinds of reptiles, on account of his great compassion which is poured out in his heart without measure, after the example of God*¹⁷³³.

¹⁷³¹ II, 10, 35-36.

¹⁷³² *In Speechless Ecstasy*, p. 148.

¹⁷³³ I, 74, p. 341 (B, 507-508).

6.5 Conclusion

One can finally observe that Isaac is faithful to his Church tradition in matter of terminology as expression of theology as well as spirituality. His discourses reveal a permanent preoccupation for the practical dimension of Christian philosophy and only subsequently and indirectly one can grasp some dogmatic insights out of the themes he develops. In consequence, it seems, the correct way of identifying his doctrine of knowledge to follow the path from experience to theory. The language and the theory are subordinated to the facts. This is what, technically, we call inductive method, which begins from particular and goes towards general. Therefore, analysing the doctrinal dimension of Isaac's epistemology presupposes identifying some general constants of the ascetical-mystical life that will denote a specific theological belonging.

Isaac's doctrine of knowledge allows to human the possibility of getting into contact with the divine and, in consequence, the dogmatic language he uses to express that is courageous and places him in the middle of theological discussions of his time, despite the fact his attitude is clearly an anti-polemic manifest. Before he is a theologian, he is a mystic, and this gives him the necessary freedom to express the possibility of knowing, perceiving and seeing God, as I will show in the chapter dedicated to the final conclusions.

Final conclusions

In the introduction of the thesis we have announced the theme to be researched on – the doctrine of knowledge according to Isaac of Niniveh in reference to the patristic authors he is indebted to, within the frame of the contemporary theology of the Church he belonged to. In addition, there were other two previewed objectives– the first one to identify a theological-anthropological system, generated by a double synthesis (between the Antiochene and Alexandrian Schools, on the one hand, and between the Byzantine thinking and the Syriac ascetical tradition, on the other hand), as basis for expressing a gnoseological process; secondly, in dealing with this topic, one could grasp fragmentary information regarding the monastic practices of the time in the East Syriac Church.

In the concluding section, the first aspect to deal with refers to the very concept of “doctrine” attached to the process of knowledge, as present in Isaac’s discourses. Naturally appears the interrogation: is there really a doctrine of knowledge? One could argue that the bishop of Niniveh was not so much a theoretician and he did not really deal with any religious, anthropological, ascetic or mystic system. He was an ascetical oriented person. In consequence, we can easily observe a primacy of the spiritual exercises he talks about to the verbal or written form of his discourses. Referring to the first category (practice), one can hardly speak about a “doctrine”, while, in correspondence to the second (theoretical expression), it is more proper to refer to it, as there he expresses some ascetical, and, occasionally, mystical experiences, using terms and concepts inherited from distinct theological and anthropological traditions and different authors. To put it differently, there is a primacy of experience to the doctrinal expression and, in consequence, a primacy of the intuitive cognitive method to the discursive one, and yet the experience is expressed in an objective way by means of technical language, logical succession and structure, as well as a specific method, as we argued above.

In this frame, one can speak about a doctrine of knowledge corresponding to what the ascetical traditions call “constants” of the monastic life, holistically described as a cognitive process. These constants generate a system that is common to different monastic traditions, but they also provide specific elements due both to the topos and to the personal formation of the author in question.

Referring in particular to Isaac, our endeavour was to identify and critically analyse the cognitive elements present in his discourses, in correspondence with the theology of the Church of his time, with the purpose of trying to build a possible systematic doctrine. The methodology involved was mostly inductive, starting from the specific, concrete elements, out

of practice, and going towards general principles. To put it differently, that means the main aim of the research was to identify the principles that stand at the very basis of the practice, interpreted in a gnoseological line.

In parallel, the present research has also been carried out from a historical perspective, namely referring to the analysis of the concept as part of a specific monastic tradition, interpreted within the religious and cultural context of the time –the East Syriac dyophysite Christology of the 7-8th century – in reference to its evolution in diverse previous patristic writings up to that very moment. The reference to Christology is essential in dealing with the concept of knowledge, for, theologically speaking, the possibility of divine knowledge resides in the way one expresses the relation between the two natures in Christ (*communicatio idiomatum*). Christ was the perfect human who had the possibility to have access to divinity in the highest way and, in consequence, as highlighted above, the human being may not reach the divine knowledge out of Christ's incarnation. This is why, after a short presentation of Isaac's bio-bibliography, in the second chapter, we have dwelt at large on the Christological disputes in Isaac's time in the East Syriac community, so as to picture the context of the problem – in reference to a strict official dyophysite Christology, is it possible to speak about a mystical knowledge of the divine? We have seen there was not a unitary perspective, but different positions, less or more radical, among the monastics, professors or church leaders. The main doctrinal concern of the time was the conservation of the Theodorian dyophysite Christology, considered to be the specific tradition of the East Syriac theology; and the condemnation of the Messalian doctrine, occasionally associated with the charismatic monastics, an idea present in almost all situations listed in this second chapter. The conclusion of this chapter highlighted the existence of mostly two theological positions – an intellectual, philosophical or scholastic direction, advocated by representatives from three social categories (Church leaders, professors or, occasionally, monastics), and a practical-mystical perspective, professed mostly by monastics. At this point, one can identify either an antinomian attitude from the perspective of monastics, or, at least, a conciliatory position, manifested by reticence regarding the theological matters, in general, and Christological ones, in particular.

The third chapter focused on picturing the historical-theological development and evolution of the subject in Isaac's discourses, along with the Theodorian historical – soteriological schema of the two ages (before and after incarnation), in correspondence to three fundamental moments in God's Economy, which stand at the very basis of the evolution. More precisely, in the line of Theodore of Mopsuestia's linear soteriological

teaching, we have dealt with Protology, Incarnation and Eschatology, as three decisive moments in God's Economy, on one hand, and, in consequence, in human's progressive cognitive evolution vis-à-vis the spiritual realities. The pedagogical dimension of history in Theodore's thinking is highly present in Isaac's own perspective. The very content of the educational process is the divine knowledge and, in particular, the initiation in God's love. Synthetically, the conclusion of this chapter points to the revelation importance of Christ's incarnation in the process of knowledge, the very foundation for the possibility of reaching divine knowledge. This moment inaugurated the eschatological knowledge, partially anticipated in the earthly life and fully in the life to come.

After the first three chapters picturing the general frame of the discussion, the fourth part was dedicated to the phraseology used by Isaac to describe the process of knowledge, divided into four categories – terms referring to ascetical stages, then terms describing the cognitive powers, thirdly some adjacent terms belonging to the same cognitive sphere, and, finally, terms describing the forms of knowledge. The existence of a technical language in Isaac's discourses supports the thesis evoked above referring to the existence of a "doctrine" of knowledge as such. Furthermore, the use of a rich theological-anthropological language reveals Isaac as a subtle and a theologian of nuances (we know that initially he was a teacher in his native land). If the historical schema is inherited from Theodore of Mopsuestia, in terms of language Isaac is indebted to Evagrius' ontological philosophical and anthropological phraseology, on the one hand, and to John the Solitary and the Syriac common ascetical tradition, in reference to the ascetical itinerary, on the other hand. And yet, despite the fact that one could observe the very sources of the cognitive terminology, Isaac did not only use them as such, but he had his own interpretation and development of the concepts in a personal manner.

The next chapter, the largest one, was dedicated specifically to the process of knowledge itself. Divided into ten subchapters, there were three directions I have dealt with. Firstly, we have identified the epistemology suggested by Isaac – theologically called "theanthropic knowledge", fully illustrated in the perfect man, Jesus Christ, knowledge in which validity and "effectiveness" are confirmed. We have argued that Isaac advocates for this method, as in his opinion it is the only verified and natural one, lacking any unreal, abstract or imagined element. It (re)connects the natural and the supernatural, creates bridges between earthly and celestial reality, between the senses and the powers of the soul, or between time and eternity. The bishop of Niniveh accurately expresses this type of knowledge when he defines it as "perception of immortal life", that is "the knowledge in God". The

gnoseology advocated by Isaac is not purely theological (due to grace alone), nor purely anthropological (ontological), but rather it reflects a synergy between the two, perfectly achieved in Christ. From this perspective, Christian philosophy is described as a theanthropic asceticism of the noetic powers and the natural human in its integrity.

Secondly, we have dwelt at large on the powers of the soul and their modes of manifestation as they appear at Isaac in correspondence to some Syriac important representatives, highlighting the anthropological dimension of the process of knowledge. An interesting aspect to be mentioned here refers to the synthesis he makes between the noetic perspective (centred on *nous*) and the line of “the school of feeling” (centred on the heart). This reveals Isaac as a faithful representative of the hesychast eastern tradition, generically interpreted, as argued above. This idea is verified by the fact that Isaac, next to Pseudo Macarius, Diadochus of Photice and Symeon the New Theologian, was quoted by Gregory Palamas in his writings during the hesychast disputes of the 14th century.

The third important section of this chapter was dedicated to the different forms of knowledge mostly analysed in binomial rapports – worldly and spiritual knowledge, knowledge and faith, knowledge and un-knowledge, knowledge and vision, knowledge and spiritual prayer. In addition to these aspects, we have also dealt with the common tripartite division – knowledge out of creation, out of Scripture and spiritual knowledge. The conclusion of this chapter clearly reveals again the presence of the Theodorian theory of the two ages in Isaac’s discourses expressed in the two types of knowledge, in a progressive succession and yet, qualitatively, completely different. The second type might be partially achieved during earthly life by means of the Spirit’s direct intervention. The pneumatical role appears clearly here in Isaac’s epistemology. Divine knowledge is anticipated during mystical experiences.

The last chapter focused on the dogmatic position regarding the spiritual knowledge. This final section has a conclusive character that aimed to respond to the question regarding the possibility of knowledge within the East Syriac theology and the East Syriac Christology, in particular, in the mentioned period. In order to do that, we have tried to identify the content, the cause, the forms, and the scope of divine knowledge. The conclusive remarks of this chapter came along with those evoked in the previous chapters. Isaac, being faithful to his Church’s theology, professes an opened Christology that gives space to the possibility of knowing, perceiving and seeing God. Despite the flexibility of the language and the scarce systematic character of his discourses, one can identify the difference he makes between the nature of God and his glory or light. Therefore, using a paradoxical terminology, he asserts that knowledge is limited, an idea developed in the concept of un-knowledge. In the same line, he asserts that advancing in this process

means being conscious that one knows nothing. Regarding the concept of perception, the bishop of Niniveh uses symbols so as to express the reality of the heavenly things, partially revealed to the ascetic. Here, one identifies the symbolic phraseology specific to the Syriac tradition that suggests the transcendence of God vis-à-vis humans, on the one hand, and, yet, advocates a mysterious way of “tasting” or “feeling” the divine presence. We may observe the sensuality of the symbolic description: burning heat, sweetness, frankincense. The third concept, probably the most problematic, is the divine vision. The very object of this spiritual work is God’s glory and light by means of Christ’s glorified body, mirror and image of the divine essence, manifested in the form of *theoria*, wonder, or spiritual prayer, and not God’s essence. According to the specific Evagrian language, it is about the vision of the formless light. Isaac calls it “light of the Holy Trinity” or “divine light”. Regarding the term glory, it occurs in different lexical construction as: “ineffable glory”, “unspeakable glory”, “delightful glory”, “divine glory”, “eternal glory”, “glory of divinity”, “glory of the New World” or “glory of the Kingdom”. All the three forms evoked above are generated by the direct intervention of the Holy Spirit during the spiritual conduct and imply a passive presence of the subject. This mystical presence is described by the biblical expression “overshadowing”.

Isaac proclaims a gnoseology in perfect symmetry with the moral life. As one evolves in the ascetic spiritual life, he proportionally makes progress in the divine knowledge too. Virtues are not just creative powers of knowledge, but also principles of knowledge, through which one reaches “knowledge out of knowledge”. For Isaac the process of knowledge is not simply dialectical, but ascetical as well. Therefore, the method implied in his discourses is theanthropic, comprising both human’s ascetical participation – bodily and noetic (ontological structure as well as ascetical work) – and the divine direct intervention.

In conclusion, by the doctrine of knowledge he professed, Isaac belonged to the ascetical oriented party of his Church, antinomian in attitude, and, thus, manifesting a non-polemic conciliatory position (except his attitude against the Messalians), subordinated to his practical perspective. One might call that “ecumenical mysticism”. His Christological language is faithful to the tradition of his own community and yet, as he omits some problematic terminology, he gives space to a courageous expression of the process of knowing, feeling or seeing God, concepts specific to the monastic spiritual literature.

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